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Anniversaries And New Beginnings



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This year marks the 20th anniversary of Halo, one of the most celebrated gaming franchises out there. This year is also *Game Informer's* 30th anniversary. As luck would have it, we are honoring both anniversaries together. Microsoft and developer 343 Industries are celebrating in the best way possible – with the release of Halo Infinite on December 8. Two weeks later, on December 21, *Game Informer* is ushering in a redesign codenamed *Game Informer Next*.

You'll have to wait a month to get your hands on the game and magazine, but you'll learn about both in this issue. As you flip through this issue, you'll eventually run into 20 pages dedicated to Halo Infinite. We take deep dives into both the campaign and multiplayer, outlining what you can expect from this massive game. We also asked key members at 343 Industries what Halo means to them. Bonnie Ross, Joseph Staten, and Frank O'Connor all share their perspective on the franchise and the newest entry in this beloved sci-fi franchise.

Throughout all of November, *Game Informer's* website and YouTube channel will be updated with additional Halo Infinite content, including exclusive gameplay footage showing how much this game has changed since its July 2020 gameplay reveal.

I don't want to give away too much of what you can expect from *Game Informer's* redesign, but I can say the focus is a "celebration of games." The entire *Game Informer* team – from our writers and video talent to artists and programmers – have come together to hone in on what that truly means. I love what we've dreamed up so far and can't wait to share it with you in just one month! You can get a taste of what we are planning right now through two new podcasts we just launched: Brian Shea's *All Things Nintendo*, which is precisely what it says it is, and Ben Reeves' *Video Gameography*, a serialized show that explores why specific game franchises are essential.

We also just launched a new product called *Game Informer Gold*. It's the same magazine we make now but printed on some of the best paper in the world, with high-gloss pages and gold foil on the cover. We aren't selling this high-end product just yet, and are still figuring out what kind of demand there is for it. For now, we're giving them away to random people who read our website, subscribe to our Twitch channel, and interact with us on social media. Each run of *Game Informer Gold* is extremely limited, making it one of the rarest collectibles in the world. The first issue (with Saints Row on the cover) is limited to just 50 issues, and each one is uniquely numbered.

Enjoy the Halo: Infinite coverage. Enjoy the review section jam-packed with must-play games. And enjoy the busy holiday season of gaming! We'll see you in just one month for a new era of *Game Informer*!

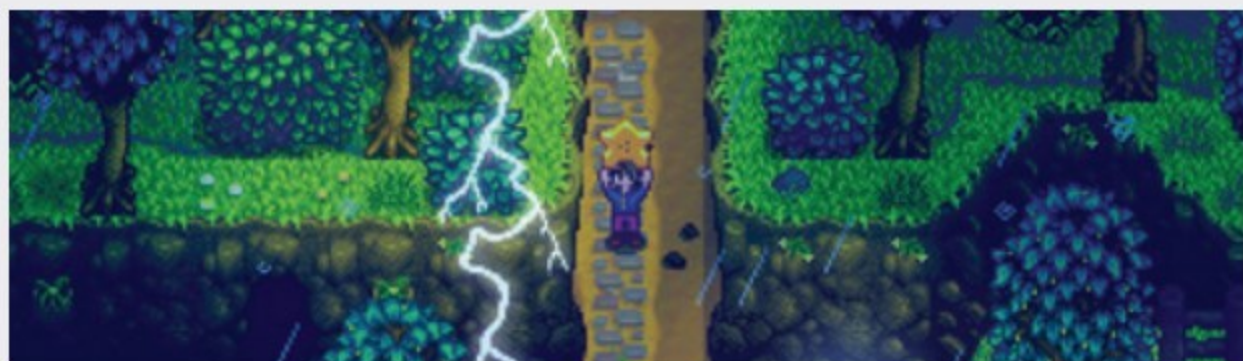
Be safe. Be happy. And game on!

Reiner



38 Halo Infinite

343 Industries is going back to its franchise roots to craft Halo Infinite. From campaign to multiplayer, it's a game rooted in the earliest traditions of the series while making it all feel brand new. Read our massive 20-page cover story. **by Matt Miller**



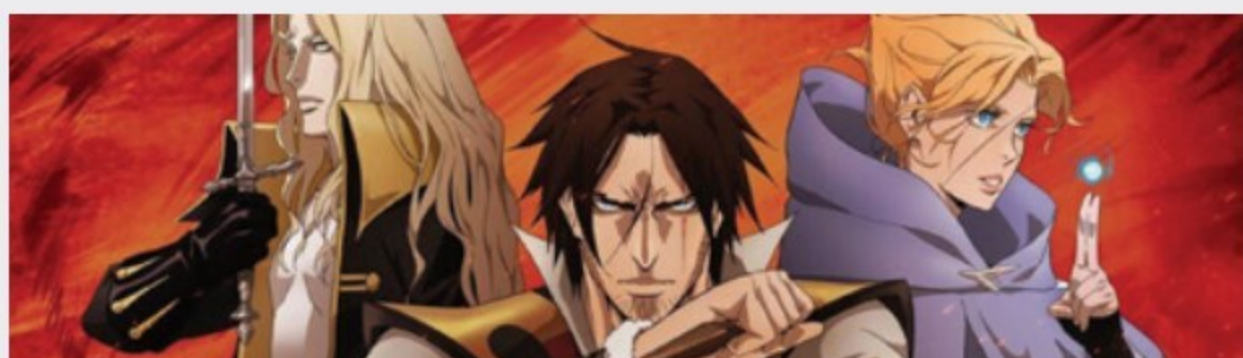
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Love video games? Love anime? Do we have the list for you. Read our picks for all the best anime series based on games in this comprehensive rundown.



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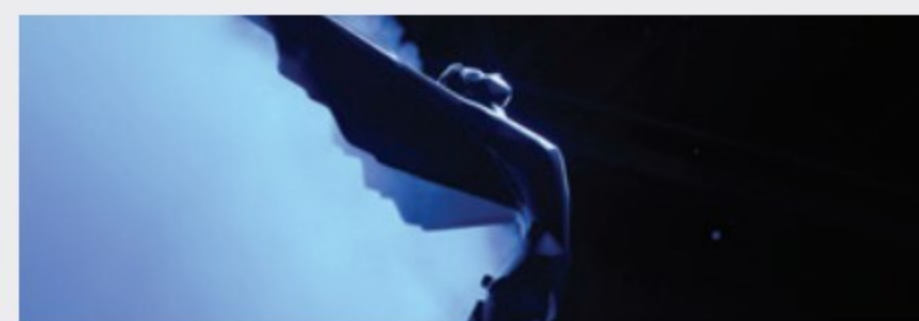
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One of the most recognizable names in independent game development, we spoke with the Binding of Isaac creator about how he got interested in games, his early work, success, and what's next.



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Nintendo's new Switch model is here, and we've spent a lot of time putting it through its paces. But is a better-looking screen worth the cost of admission?



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The game industry's biggest night is just around the corner. We caught up with host and director Geoff Keighley to talk about this year's show, turning down game reveals, and the pressures of COVID-19.

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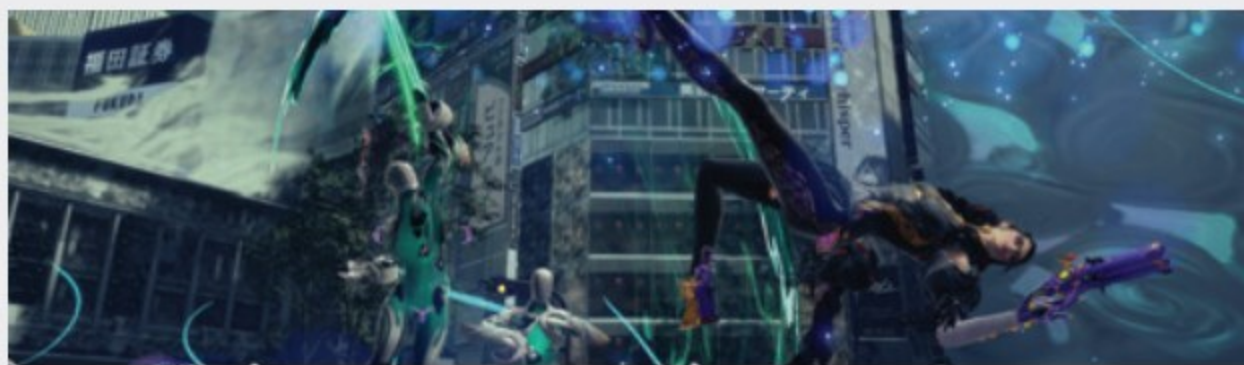
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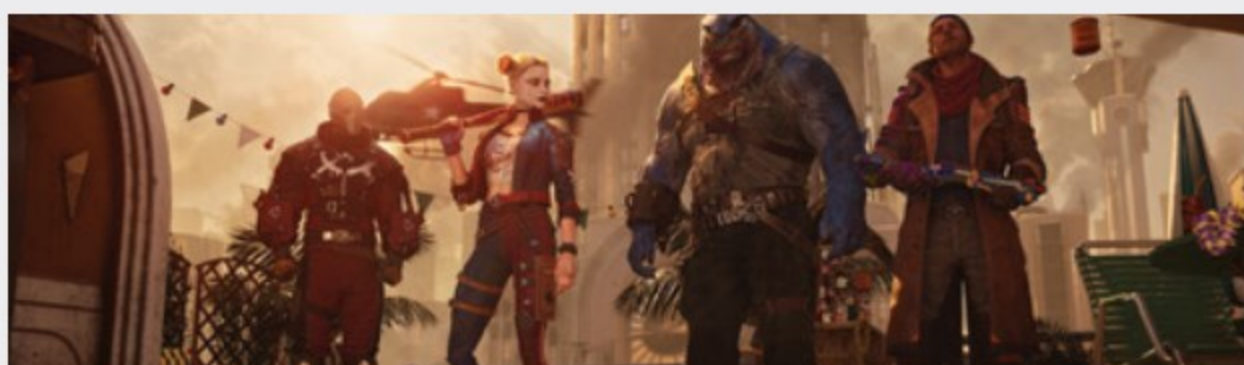
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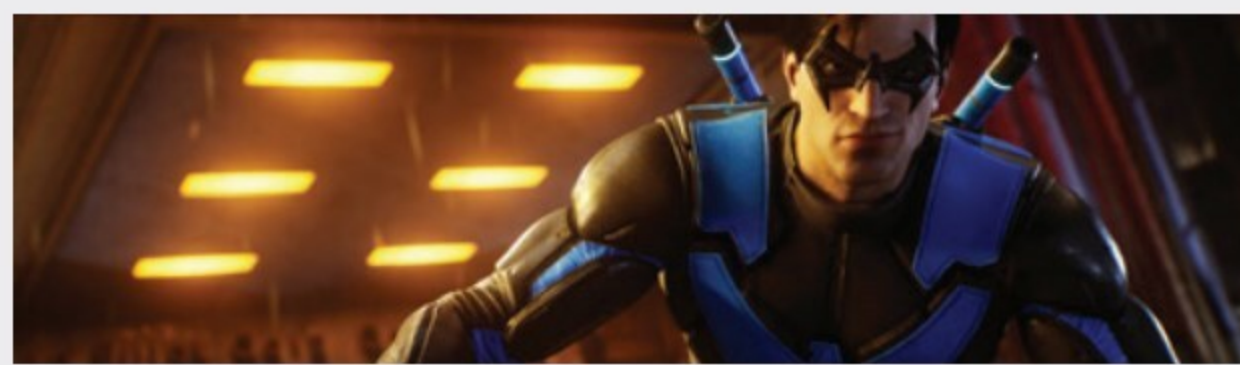
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After years of silence, Platinum Games has finally provided a new look at Bayonetta 3. Find out what's new – like the titular character's haircut – in this upcoming Switch exclusive.



60 Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy – The Definitive Edition
Timed with GTA III's 20th anniversary, Rockstar announced a remastered collection of III, Vice City, and San Andreas, complete with better visuals and updated gameplay.



64 Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League
After a pre-rendered reveal trailer last year, we finally have a slightly better idea of what Rocksteady's new superhero game is all about.



65 Gotham Knights
The Bat is back. Well, kind of. Actually, the Bat is dead. But the Bat's friends are back. We have a slew of new info about this upcoming multiplayer adventure set in Gotham City.



75 Far Cry 6
Ubisoft returns with its landmark first-person franchise. While it's got all the wackiness and bombast you might expect from a Far Cry game, it's this entry's menacing new villain that takes it over the edge.



78 Metroid Dread
More than a decade passed without a new 2D Metroid game. But with Metroid Dread, the series is back stronger than ever. Read why this is one of Nintendo's best games of the year.



76 Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy
The universe's favorite band of misfits is finally here in video game form. But how does Guardians of the Galaxy stack up to Marvel's other recent games?



77 Back 4 Blood
Team up with three friends and get ready for guts. Turtle Rock is back (4 Blood), returning to the zombie genre it cut its teeth on.

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This month, our readers want fewer open-world games, wonder why Kirby is beloved, and bond with loved ones over video games!

Saints Row

I'm glad Volition is getting another crack at making Saints Row games. I always thought this studio was on the brink of becoming the next triple-A juggernaut. Along with Saints 3, Red Faction and The Punisher were fantastic games! Here's hoping this Saints Row reboot is the follow-up that gets Volition to that point. It would be nice for Grand Theft Auto to have some serious competition in the open-world-driving space.

Adam Snead
via email

A Saints Row game without Johnny Gat is like a Halo game without Master Chief! My favorite Halo game is Halo: Reach, which didn't have the big, green guy, so excluding the heart and soul of the Saints team might be the right call after all!

Kelm O'Conner
Pawtucket, RI

To this day, Saints Row: The Third is still the king of cooperative play. Nothing else comes close to touching the fun it delivers. If Volition can replicate that experience in this new game, look out, people! I'm a bit bummed this game won't be in a bustling city like

Steelport, but I do like the idea of getting out into the desert and to a place like Las Vegas. Thanks for the great write-up on it, *GI*! I'm excited to get my hands on the game now!

Samantha Heart
via email

Saints Row will once again have cooperative play, and although Johnny Gat won't be along for the ride, the Saints' iconic purple color will lead their efforts in this new era. With Disney approaching numerous developers to work on new Marvel projects, we'd love to see Volition get a second crack at The Punisher. Although we also wouldn't mind seeing what Red Faction looks like with next-gen destruction!

Nintendo's Lack Of Power

The Switch OLED is not the machine I wanted. I don't know who it is for! It doesn't do 4K, isn't powerful enough to play most of the big triple-A releases like Call of Duty: Vanguard, and basically is just a little easier on the eyes. I don't get Nintendo's strategy. Why not make a more powerful Switch to get more powerful games? This has always been the case for as long as I have been gaming. I gravitate toward

Nintendo for Zelda and Mario but also want to play the games that often make end-of-the-year "best of" lists. That always means I have to buy a second console or PC. Nintendo is leaving money on the table. What do you think, *GI*?

Sal Las
via email

Nintendo almost always does things differently than other console manufacturers, and that's partially why its products are so special. We agree that we would love to see Nintendo's machines be powerful enough to play everything, but that's just not what it does. The good news about this generation is that power isn't everything. Cloud gaming now allows for a wider variety of devices to play powerful games. Switch is capable of this. Hitman 3 and Control play great on Switch through the Cloud. Due to latency issues, we likely won't see many multiplayer games like Call of Duty through Switch's Cloud service but Dying Light 2: Stay Human is on the way next year. Don't be surprised if Nintendo lands many more high-profile games through the Cloud as time goes on.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!



Why Open World?

Why does everything these days need to be open world? I miss the days of the linear game! I just want something I can play and beat in, say, 12-48 hours without a ton of "side quests" or other distractions. You see, I don't have a ton of time to play, and I like playing games for the central story. I don't need a ton of filler or "replay" value as the main story is enough for me – with all these side quests and what-not, I lose sight of the story, often forgetting what I even set out to do originally. Maybe they could offer a play format where they keep all the extra stuff locked, and you can choose when to unlock it?

I know that you probably think that I should just ignore the side quests and only follow the main story, but I can never seem to do that; I just get so distracted or feel like I need to help everyone I meet along the way ... I guess I make a shoddy hero! Can you recommend any games for my specific dilemma?

Jon Shutt
Lebanon, Maine

If you haven't played The Last of Us Part II or God of War yet, you are missing out on two of the best story-driven games to date. Many indie games also focus on story. Wildermyth, Deltarune, and Eastward are a few titles we think you might enjoy.

The Future Of Conventions

Before the pandemic hit, my friends and I would go to two to three gaming conventions a year. Since we live in Indiana, GenCon has always been the big one for us, but we also pick conventions that double as great vacation spots. We've been to Florida, California, Seattle, and Philadelphia. I fear conventions will never be the same again, and we won't be doing this anymore. Please tell me there's hope for big fan gatherings returning to their original form.

Jennifer Long
Carmel, IN

Some conventions like Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) recently

returned to an in-person format, but the scale was much smaller, and attendees we talked to say the magic wasn't there. We have a feeling this will be the case until the pandemic is over. Don't be surprised if many annual shows are digital for the first half of 2022. We're all hoping we can all be together again, but right now, we're just playing the waiting game. Since you have a tight-knit group of friends who love being with each other, you don't need a convention to get together. We recommend road-tripping and renting out a cabin to game it up for a weekend. Just make sure the cabin has great internet!

Why Kirby?

I don't understand why Kirby is a popular character. All I see is a pink ball that becomes cooler when taking on the traits of Link, Samus, or any other famed character. Kirby is just like Ditto from Pokémon, but you don't see Ditto headlining games. That's because Pokémon fans know a shapeshifter is a second-tier character. Kirby shouldn't be in the spotlight. I genuinely believe the games starring this oddball would be better with new characters instead.

Jaime Sanada
via email

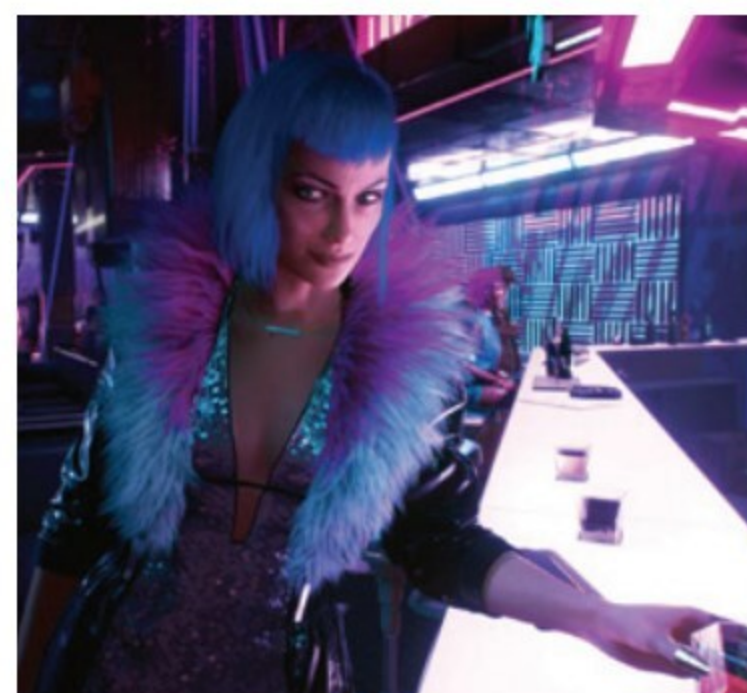
While you make a good point about Kirby being a shapeshifter of sorts, there are few game characters we want to hug more. Kirby is as adorable as they come, and that's a good enough reason for Nintendo to continue bringing this pink star back for more adventures. You can read about Kirby's next outing in the Forgotten Land on page 62.

Cyberpunk 2077: A Year Later

I played Cyberpunk 2077 the right way: on PC. My friends are still waiting for the next-gen patch to hit PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X. The fact that a year has gone by and we still don't know when that patch will hit is one of the strangest and most worrying things I've heard in gaming. Is CD Projekt Red struggling to bring it to those consoles? Given the delay with those versions, does this mean we won't likely get the expansions? I really enjoyed the game and would love to revisit Night City.

Conrad Walker
Chicago, IL

Game development is different for every studio. We don't know how progress is faring on the next-gen patch, but we know CD Projekt Red is working on it. The first expansion is also in active development. These additions were likely affected by CD Projekt Red having to shift focus to fixing the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions. Now that those last-gen iterations are playable (and back on digital storefronts), we're hoping the focus is mainly on the future for this studio.



Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"With the recent Mario-themed Lego sets, is there any potential for a Lego Mario video game?"

We would be shocked if Nintendo, Lego, and TT Games (the studio behind most of the Lego games) weren't discussing making this project a reality. That said, nothing is official at this point. Overwatch's Lego debut also hasn't produced a game.

"How is it that EA has two of the best racing series in Need for Speed and Burnout and can't seem to keep either of them alive?"

Numerous wrong turns with both series led to two flat tires and the need to reboot. We hope we see both return soon. As much as we love Forza and Gran Turismo, these two series add different elements that are sorely missing.

"For all of you still waiting to get a PlayStation 5, know this: Somewhere in Sony, someone is working on PlayStation 6."

That's a terrifying thought, and we bet it's true! Odds are we won't see the fruits of those potential labors for many years.

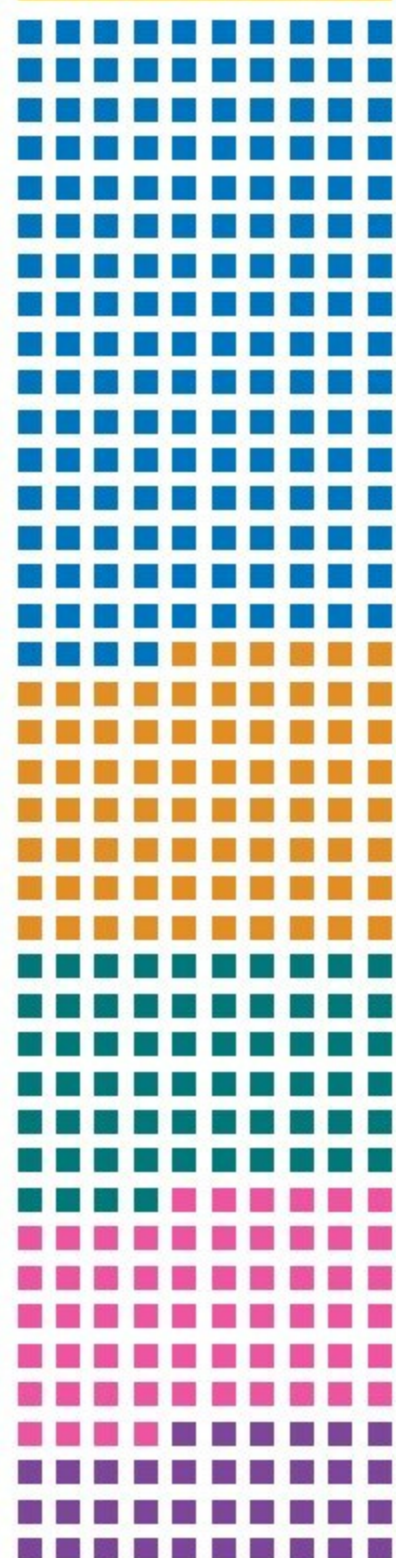
Best Quote:

"The most recommended game this year isn't a game at all. It's *Squid Game*!"

Question Of The Month:

What gaming system is having the best year and why?

On Your Mind



- Are hoping for a miracle that the PS5 will be available during the holidays
- Are hoping Santa Claus can make more PS5s
- Like Switch OLED and suggest playing Breath of the Wild on it
- Have kids who play Roblox
- Feel *Free Guy* is the best video game movie ever

Sharing A Magazine

I just wanted to thank all of you “Game Informers” for doing what you do. My dad had a rough ride with Covid-19 and was bedridden for three weeks. Thankfully, he is now 100-percent healthy with no lingering side effects. When he was stuck in bed, he couldn’t focus on a TV well, so he read everything he could and even grabbed my most recent *Game Informer* – which he’s never done before. He was so intrigued by what he saw that he took a chance on his

first game system (a PlayStation 4) and is now more into games than I am. I can’t begin to tell you how happy I am! His first game was The Forgotten City, and now he’s a couple dozen hours into Far Cry 6 and has Life is Strange: True Colors queued up as his next game. He wishes he would have started when he was younger! To all of you kids out there, share your magazine with your folks! It may change their (and your) life!

Kim Lebedev
Stevens Point, WI



We love hearing stories like this and, above everything, are happy your dad is doing great following a scary moment. Here’s to many, many more years of gaming with your Pop! Just wait until he gets interested in the next generation of games!



Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers how many games they purchase in a year. Here’s what they had to say ...

Having Game Pass, Games With Gold, and PlayStation Plus hasn’t slowed my game purchases much. I still want to get all of the big games on day one, and I probably buy six or seven games a year. The free games I get through those services just makes me play more games in a year. It’s a win-win situation for me!

Carlos Bearra
via email

I can’t remember the last time I purchased a game or even went to a store to buy anything. I have everything delivered to me, and all of the games I play are F2P. That said, I do sink a considerable amount of money into Fortnite.

Laurie Meissner
Toronto, Canada

I don’t buy many games myself – maybe two or three a year – but I do still receive them as gifts. I mostly put games on my birthday and Christmas lists, and that’s usually what I get.

Tommy Wells
via email

WINNER

1 Adam Hunter Peck

That flower needs to be renamed "warrior princess" in this game.

2 Emily Bailey

Don't worry, Alexios. You'll always be our second favorite Assassin's Creed Odyssey protagonist.

3 Desiree Taylor

You'd be starstruck too if someone drew such a lovely portrait of you for a magazine.

4 Emily Mishoe

Eevee's new confetti throw move is super effective.

5 Dustin Huhn

Does anyone else suddenly have a craving for bubble gum?



gallery



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Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

AFTERMATH OF SUCCESS

**Darkest Dungeon, Valheim,
and Stardew Valley devs on life
following triumph**

by Jill Grodt



Imagine waking up to find the little-known passion project you have been working on for years has rapidly become popular beyond your wildest expectations. It's the kind of success developers dream of, but so few achieve. Even if a game has a fantastic story, inventive mechanics, and a unique style, there is no guarantee it will prosper. The competition is fierce, with tons of games releasing every day, and it's a struggle to catch people's attention. And yet, there are success stories of developers who managed to overcome all these hurdles and create astoundingly popular games. The creators of Darkest Dungeon, Stardew Valley, and Valheim are unanimously grateful to their fans for giving them a shot, and they acknowledge the creative freedom their success provides. However, they also spoke about the intense amount of work it is to maintain the next biggest hit, as well as their struggles with doubt and finding purpose when moving onto new projects.

FIRST STEPS

When asked about how they envisioned the future when they started their Vancouver-based company in 2013, Red Hook Studios co-founders Chris Bourassa and Tyler Sigman answered almost in unison: "We didn't." The duo left their previous employers behind to launch the Lovecraft-inspired studio, but, as Sigman explains, "it was always about the game, it was never about the company." The game he's referring to is Darkest Dungeon, a gothic, dungeon-crawling RPG where your party's mental status is just as vital as their physical one. And, though the project has now surpassed 5 million copies sold, and its hotly anticipated sequel is on Epic's Early Access, the first step to getting there wasn't what anyone would call glamorous.

"It was three of us in a room, in another studio that they were letting us borrow," recalls Bourassa. "There were rats in that building and human poop on the doorstep the first day we went to take possession as it were – and I use that term in the broadest possible sense. We would listen to the other studio argue, sometimes explosively, about games, and we just kind of put our heads down and were trying to work away."

Similarly, Eric Barone, creator of Stardew Valley, didn't begin by thinking about a development studio. In fact, he didn't even begin by thinking about a game.

"It started out as kind of a practice to get better at programming," Barone says, talking about the earliest inception of his mega indie hit. Unable to land a job out of college, he decided to increase his skill set by making a small title in the C# programming language. The initial plan, Barone explains, was to make something he could put on his resume to impress possible employers.

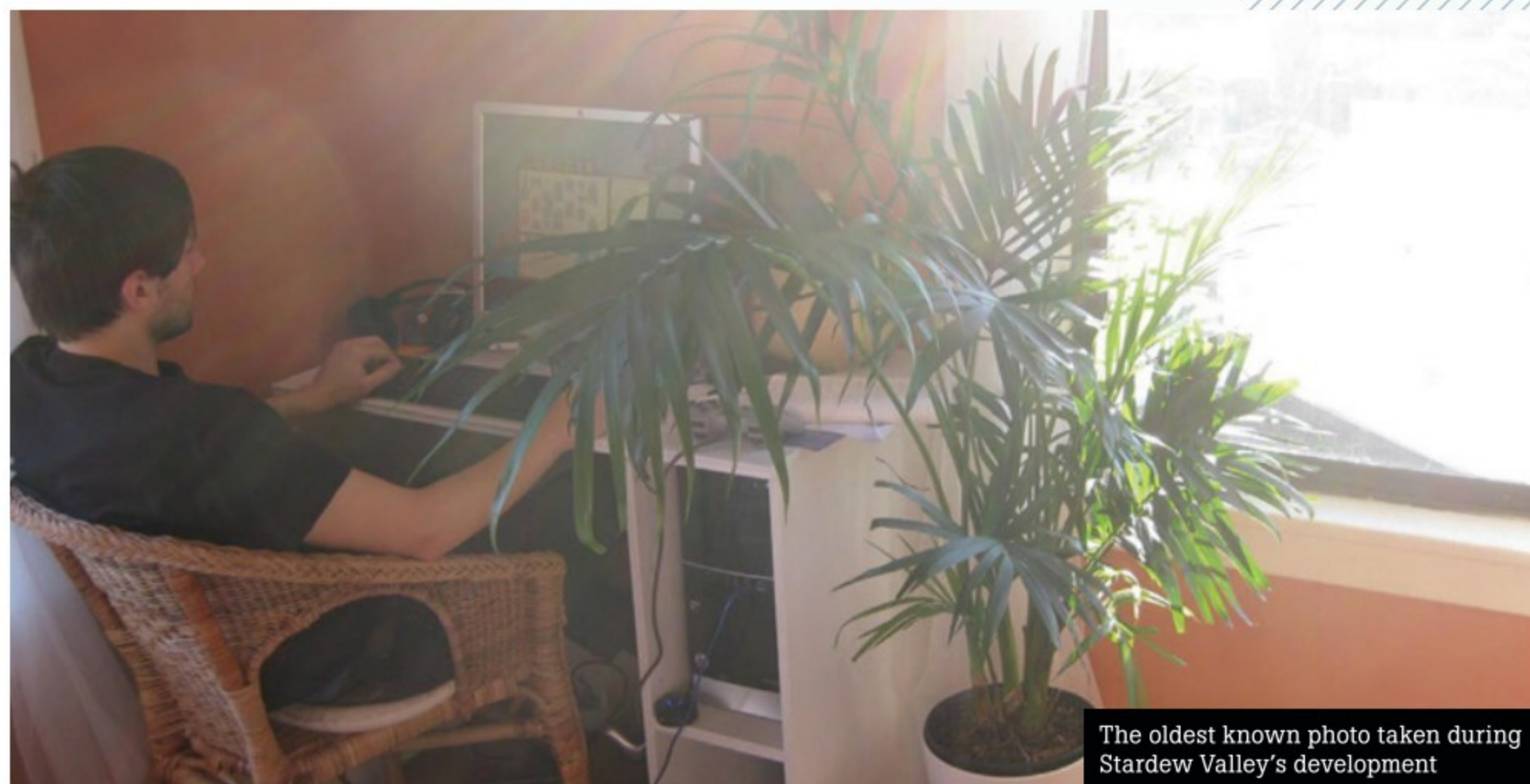
Employment is no longer a concern for the developer. Stardew Valley just crossed the 15 million units sold milestone, with sales showing no sign of slowing down even years after the Harvest Moon-inspired farming simulation first launched in 2016. But back in the early days of development, it

would have been difficult to guess that the training exercise would become a household name.

"It was very scrappy," says Barone, "It was just me in the corner of our studio apartment on a cheap IKEA desk and my budget computer, just working on it. It never crossed my mind to get an actual studio or anything like that – especially because I was a completely solo developer ... It's kind of a miracle that the whole thing came together because I really had no idea what I was doing."

Henrik Törnqvist, co-founder of Iron Gate Studio – which is making Valheim, a Viking-influenced, open-world game that stitches together base-building, resource collecting, life simulation, survival, exploration, and boss-battling action – vividly recalls having a tough time coming up with the studio's name and navigating the paperwork required to get the company set up in 2019. However, filing a mountain of forms and frustrating brainstorming sessions are a small price to pay for what became an almost overnight mega-hit.

Valheim is still technically unreleased, being an Early Access title, but the 2021 sensation was already on the way to selling 8 million copies earlier this summer. Its development began in 2018 when Richard Svensson, Iron Gate's other co-founder, started playing around with the Norse-inspired world. Impressed with the game and ready to move on from his previous employer, Törnqvist joined Svensson a year after development began. Despite being confident in the game's potential and having the backing of publisher Coffee Stain Publishing, Törnqvist says, "Honestly, we were just developing the game we wanted to make, and we were hopeful, but realistic, about the prospects of a lo-fi Early Access survival game made by mostly one person [Svensson]. We thought it would appeal and resonate strongly with a very niche audience, but we had no idea it would resonate with millions of people."



The oldest known photo taken during Stardew Valley's development

UNBELIEVABLE ACCOMPLISHMENT

Darkest Dungeon's Kickstarter campaign launched in 2014 and the developers watched in disbelief as the project flew past its goal in the first 24 hours. "Is this not the best of things?" Bourassa asks when thinking about that time in the title's history. "The game that you care about has an audience."

He and his studio co-founder say they were careful to keep a sense of perspective even as the pledges continued to pour in. "We didn't start losing our heads with fantasies of a massive, sprawling game and a huge audience," he says. However, Bourassa did succumb to the immediate surge of joy at Darkest Dungeon's later successful Early Access release, at least for a moment.

"It was the first time I kissed a man," Bourassa says. In response, his fellow founder, Sigman, raises his hand, declaring, "I received it." The euphoria faded fast, however. Sigman says, "[The success] changed it immediately from, 'Okay, I think this game will have been worth doing, and we'll be able to pay ourselves something,' to 'Oh, s---, we have a tiger by the tail.'"

The first fruits of overwhelming success were hard to process for the Valheim and Stardew Valley developers as well. "It was a bit of a blur!" exclaims Törnqvist when asked about his reaction to Valheim selling one million copies in its first week of Early Access.



Valheim

"At Iron Gate, we were so focused on development and scale-proofing the game that it didn't really register; I still don't think it really has."

On the other hand, Barone remembers Stardew Valley's "surging popularity" and the feeling that "everyone's talking about" his game. But his most dazzling memory from that time is meeting his inspiration, Yasuhiro Wada, who created the Harvest Moon series, which then evolved into Story of Seasons. "Mr. Wada, the creator of

Harvest Moon, or his people, reached out to me, and he wanted to meet me," Barone says. "I mean, that was one of many moments where my mind was blown. And it really sank in as to how big this actually was. That I had just achieved way beyond anything I had ever dreamed of and just being seen in the same kind of arena as Harvest Moon – the game that inspired me to do all this – was kind of mind-blowing. And I'm still kind of shocked and amazed by that, in many ways."



Red Hook Studios shows off Darkest Dungeon's The Cove Update at PAX West



NOW WHAT?

Party poppers litter the floor and empty champagne glasses clutter tables, but the teams don't rest after their triumphs. Actually, their work grows more intense. According to Barone, the time after launch "was probably the busiest time of the entire four-and-a-half years that it took to make the game." Echoing this sentiment, Törnqvist says, "We had so many incredible opportunities coming in, and suddenly such a big community, and trying to respond to everyone, let alone move these opportunities along is a full-time job!"

It took a few months for the Darkest Dungeon team to feel the change, but with a game in Early Access where you build a title in full view of the community, it was bound to come. "I think expectations, and managing those expectations, became much more of a clear and present danger during Early Access," explains Bourassa. This shift came after players had put hours into the game and began to hold opinions of their own on what the game should be. "And we're much more conscious of having this really big player base, and we want to do well by them," says Sigman. "But we also know that the way we got there was by being really true to our own sense of the vision. So, there's a little more weight now because you can anger 5 million people overnight."

For Barone, he remembers the public attention becoming conspicuous earlier on in Stardew Valley's development, right after the project was greenlit on Steam. "That was when the amount of attention increased a lot," he recalls. "Which, of course, can be kind of a shock and can be challenging when that happens, especially for someone who has no prior experience. And I'm a very solitary person in many



Valheim



Red Hook Studios attends the 2016 Independent Games Festival Awards



Stardew Valley

ways. I'm used to being, kind of, just in my own private bubble working. But it was also exciting because I was thinking this game could actually be a successful game."

After his hit game was released, Barone found moving on more difficult than he expected. "I feel like my next game has to be better than Stardew Valley," he explains. "Because, you know, I want to be seen as someone who's getting better. I'm improving. The trajectory of my career is going up,

not stagnating, or going down – God forbid."

For Sigman at Red Hook, Darkest Dungeon's accomplishment also brought on an unexpected result. "It sounds funny to say," Sigman states, "But I think no matter how much you succeed, it's always easy to benchmark yourself against someone who's literally twice or three or five or 10 times as successful. It's funny that your mind can create gnawing doubt, no matter how fortunate you are."



Red Hook Studios' space grows with the team

GROWING PAINS

Each project was staggeringly fortunate, so much so that the Valheim, Stardew Valley, and Darkest Dungeon teams could all afford to scale up their operations immediately after launch, but they didn't. Törnqvist believes subtle adjustments and refinements have helped Valheim continue to thrive. "We've grown with a couple of new additions, but we took our time making sure the team is growing in the right direction and with the right people," he says.

Iron Gate recently passed a huge milestone by releasing Valheim's Hearth & Home update. The game's fans had been waiting on the new

content almost since the original Early Access release, but the team found itself unable to work on it. Overwhelmed by the pressure that millions of unanticipated players placed on the core experience, Iron Gate delayed its expansion, spending months just keeping the base game stable. "There's always pressure to introduce big changes," says Törnqvist, "and add a bulk of new content – and we will – but we want to make sure that there's a good foundation there first."

Even as Red Hook's Sigman and Bourassa discuss changes in the company's structure, it's clear the core of the studio – the relationship between its co-founders – has remained unaltered. During our chat, the two often finished each other's sentences, went off on good-natured, teasing tangents, and even began chatting amongst themselves for long periods. Similarly unchanged from the company's early days, the duo are still putting their project first. "We grew to make the game – to make Darkest Dungeon II – the way we wanted to make it," Bourassa says. "We weren't growing to fulfill an org chart. So, Red Hook as an entity continues to be second fiddle to the project itself."

"That's when the company became of value," says Sigman, "and we realized that to do this game, we should hire more employees directly." While the duo needed to increase the team to tackle their next project, the allure of the early days lingers. "It's been a massive, massive shift," Bourassa says. "It's only something you can really perceive in hindsight, I think. Because you add, like, one or two people, and it still feels like a ragtag

crew, and then you turn around and realize you've added like 15."

"I'm just thinking of the Stardew Valley developer," says Sigman, who didn't realize Eric Barone was talking with us for this article, "He could grow to a team size of 200 if he wants, probably, with the cash flow he's generated, but it's a conscious choice of what you want to be. And so, we were like, 'Okay, we're gonna grow, but we're gonna still do one project right now.'"

Incidentally, Sigman isn't far off the mark regarding Barone's thoughts on expansion. "My original idea, actually, was that I would get a team and hand off Stardew Valley to them, and then I would work on my next game. But that didn't really pan out because I just realized really quickly that I was not going to be okay with just handing off the game to other people. I'm very particular about Stardew Valley, you know? It's my baby."

The first time Barone worked with a team to develop any part of Stardew Valley was on an update that launched in 2019. "It was definitely a big change for me," Barone says. "We got an office, so I was going into a different place every day. I was spending business hours with the other team members, discussing with other people what we were going to do in the update ... it took a while to get used to it and then have a flow that worked. I do think the 1.4 update was a good update; it was successful. And it was kind of a good training for how to work with the team ... but, I definitely think there's a part of me that loves working alone, and having that 100-percent responsibility for every aspect of the game."

Couldn't Have Done It Without You

Stardew Valley, Darkest Dungeon, and Valheim have all sold millions of copies around the world and we wanted to know the secret to their success. Spoiler warning: The developers give credit to the players. Stardew Valley developer Eric Barone also sneaks in a helpful hint for anyone hoping to follow in his path: "If you're making the game that you personally love as a creator, you will make a better game, and people will be able to see the love and the heart that was put into it." It's a piece of advice that Darkest Dungeon developer and Red Hook co-founder Chris Bourassa echoes. "The only way we made [Darkest Dungeon] was to really be excited about what we're creating and feel that honestly. And that it was a success is a huge blessing that we're all really grateful for." While Valheim is the youngest member of this multi-million sales club, Iron Gate Studio's co-founder wants to give a thankful shout-out to the community. "When we launched into Early Access," says Henrik Törnqvist, "we never expected so many people would find a home in the Norse afterlife."

MOVING FORWARD

“It is kind of difficult when you have achieved all of the goals that you’d ever dreamed about,” Barone says. “You’re in this position of, ‘What do I do now? Why am I even making another game? Why am I doing this?’”

This seems to have been one of the biggest challenges facing the now well-known developer who only started down this path to find a job. “I don’t want to just retire,” Barone says. “I want to work; it gives my life meaning. But many of the factors that drove me to work so hard on Stardew Valley are now – you can kind of check them all off. I want to keep making games because I want to share my ideas with the world. I want to create a legacy for myself.”

And that’s exactly what he is doing. Barone has been working on two new titles. One is ConcernedApe’s Haunted Chocolatier, which recently caused a flurry of excitement when Barone dropped an unexpected, early game-play video on social media. “[Haunted Chocolatier] is another completely solo game, kind of like Stardew Valley, where I’m doing literally everything,” he says. “That one will probably come out first.” His second game is a collaborative work, which will give Barone the ability to flex his muscles developing as part of a team. Working simultaneously as a lone developer on one project and with another developer on a second one has given him “the best of both worlds.”

Despite the freedom he has to pick his projects, Barone recognizes his first hit will follow him throughout his career. “I’m not trying to make the next big indie hit,” Barone says. “I realize and appreciate that, when my next game comes out, I’m going to have a lot of people who play the game,



Stardew Valley developer Eric Barone

just because it’s from the guy who made Stardew Valley ... I was almost considering – it might be interesting to release the game under an alias. And people don’t even know it’s me, and then to see if it could actually just be successful on its own merits. But I feel like that’s a bit disingenuous; I’m not going to do that.”

For Törnqvist and the Valheim crew, the focus is still on their Early Access title. There is still plenty in the works for Valheim, according to Törnqvist. “[The Hearth & Home] update was always meant to be the foundation we can build on with subsequent content updates – with the Mistlands update our next major one – but the process has taught us that big updates can snowball,” he says. To combat that effect, Törnqvist and his team want to focus on gradual changes and less dramatic content drops that hit in between large expansions.

Red Hook’s co-founders have made more progress with their follow-up project than either Barone or Törnqvist. Darkest Dungeon II entered Epic Games Store Early Access on October 26, though the full release may still be some ways away. While the sequel has mixed up the game’s art style and

gameplay features, Sigman insists, “it’s also a Darkest Dungeon game. I’m really excited about what we are doing in [Darkest Dungeon II], you know? Like fleshing out and getting deeper into the heroes themselves. We’ve had a chance to honestly improve in various ways.” Like Barone as he moves on to his next project, Bourassa also notes how important it was for Red Hook not to simply chase success.

“We could have just added Metroidvania elements to the dungeons,” says Bourassa recalling the earliest brainstorming for the sequel, “and called it Darkest Dungeon II, but it didn’t feel like we could get as excited about that. What’s most important, and the way we found success the first time, was to channel our passion and excitement and our fear into this product. So, by taking the risks, we’re actually delivering something closer to the feeling of the first game, without delivering the exact same game.”

While the success of the studio’s first game certainly casts a long shadow, Sigman takes some comfort from it as well. Even if players don’t take to the sequel in the same way, he says, “At the end of the day, nobody can take away Darkest Dungeon now.”

Darkest Dungeon 2





WELCOME TO RACCOON CITY:

HOW TO MAKE A RESIDENT EVIL MOVIE

Interview by Blake Hester

After the first series of Resident Evil movies made over a billion dollars in box office revenue, production company Constantine Films is ready to reboot its biggest film franchise. But where the original series deviated drastically from the source material, new director Johannes Roberts – known for his work on *47 Meters Down* and *The Strangers: Prey At Night* – wants to do right by Capcom's original games. We caught up with Roberts to ask what it's been like bringing Raccoon City to life.

What is your relationship with the Resident Evil series?

I sort of came into the game franchise as a watcher of it, rather than a player. The game was just such a huge thing. It was really the first time that you had something that was cinematic and scary. I've always been a horror nut and [a] horror cinema nut. It was so funny to see this thing that was so totally in love with the same things that I was in love with. I used to just watch people play it [laughs]. I'd just be obsessed with it. The techniques, the horror techniques they were using, it was just so wonderfully scary.

The reason I'm asking, those first games, the camera angles are born out of technical limitations, but they were very cinematic. You've directed multiple horror films at this point. Would you say there was any specific influence on your movies from Resident Evil?

Two things have sort of run through my career making horror. One, it's all

about going through doors. I made a movie called *Outside of the Door*. This kind of thing of, "What's on the other side of the door," and you would open this door, and you wouldn't know what you were going to get into. [Resident Evil games] really sort of played heavy on that – and obviously through technical limitations, because everything would have to load into the next beat. But it really built a suspense there. And then also this thing that we definitely used in the movie, but I've definitely used a lot anyhow, is this thing of characters going off-screen and not following with them [laughs]. It's a really weird thing. I obviously went back and played those games when I started rebooting this movie, and it's such a weird – now we're in so much of a world where you are the character, and you move through the character and stuff. To have this weird thing where you just disappear off-screen, and you don't really know what's around a corner, it's such a strange and actually quite frightening thing.

Can you talk about the collaboration between the cinematographer Maxime Alexandre and yourself in staging shots that are both an homage to the games and adapting them for something that works in live-action?

What we did, where we took heavily from the games, was very much in terms of the locations and the look. I very much drew on the John Carpenter world. It's very retro. So, there's a lot of zoom lenses, a lot of long takes. It has a really '70s feel to it. I quite often would use movies like *The Parallax View*, *Invasions of the Body Snatchers*, *Don't Look Now*, *Jewel*. I love the cinematography in *Jewel*. We would use a lot of these cornerstones of '70s cinema – *The Exorcist* and stuff – and use that as my language to work within the game franchise.

I can definitely say I haven't heard anyone bring up *Don't Look Now* when talking about their video game adaptation.

[laughs] Yes, yeah. We're just at this stage of finishing the movie now, and we're going into the color timing of it all. It's really fun, the idea of bringing out these really vibrant reds in a way that you would in a Dario Argento movie or something like *Don't Look Now*, which has that sort of red theme going through it. I'm very influenced by '70s cinema, and in this movie in particular because it felt like a sort of

'70s conspiracy thriller in some of the themes that we were using.

Especially in those first few Resident Evil games, I feel like people forget about the messages of eco-terror and abuses of power. They're weirdly political games for how goofy they can be. When you were writing it, especially considering where we are in 2021, were you thinking about those themes?

We all had very different film tastes, but we had key things that sort of drew us together. One of the big things was the love of [the] '70s conspiracy thriller movie that really is at the heart of this movie. There's a couple of really great pieces of filmmaking that came out [around] the time. *Chernobyl*, the TV series, I remember watching it, and all of us came into the office, and we were just talking about how unbelievably good it was – the storytelling, the themes, the cover-up. How scary it was by being so normal and just the terrifying nature of what happens to people with radiation sickness. So, we would talk a lot about these kind of cover-ups, and all the themes that Resident Evil was built on. We would look at movies like *Dark Water*, the Mark Ruffalo movie, and just look at things that were happening in America, like the Flint water crisis and all that kind of stuff.

What's it been like adapting some of those locations for a live-action movie?

What I felt hadn't really been done before in game adaptations is to treat the source material with the respect that you would treat a novel. And that was my real guiding principle. You know, we're telling our own story, but let's treat this world with real respect and work within the lore and the locations and the world of Resident Evil, the games. So we went to Capcom,



and we got blueprints – like architectural blueprints – of the mansion, of the police station. So, the build of these things is identical to the game. It was incredible walking around these sets and going, "I'm f---ing in the mansion now. I'm actually walking around this game I've been playing for 25 years [laughs]." That was so cool. And then to have fun taking sequences and doing it for the first time on [film], like the iconic turn-around zombie from the first game, the first time you see the zombie. You know, it's like that big moment that really had never been done before in computer games. Putting that onscreen was just – I remember one of the producers coming up to me and just saying they got shivers down their spine because it's just so cool to do that.

What stands out to you as the most challenging part of making this movie?

Do you know what? The biggest challenge and, I guess most frightened I have ever been when doing this, was the zombie aspect – and I've never really realized it until we were doing the siege on the police station. The movie is very much influenced by *Assault on Precinct 13* and uses

that a lot as a touchstone to tell the narrative. We have this big siege at the police station. Suddenly, I was standing there, and the zombies all arrived, and suddenly you realize you have the weight of, like, 60 years of zombie movies on you. You've gotta get this s---t right, and you've gotta bring something fresh, and you've gotta scare again. When people have seen zombies – you know, they found them scary, then they found them not scary again, they've become part of comedy. They've become everything. That was really tough to be able to create a story that had a dramatic theme and was grounded to a certain extent. I mean, it's very John Carpenter-influenced, so it has its own world. But within that world, you need it to be believable within the reality of that world and to scare people again and make them really fear the zombies and the whole armada of creatures that we let loose. So, that was very frightening. I remember that day super closely. I remember feeling, "Oh my God, if I f--k this up, I'm in real trouble. People are going to kill me." The weight of that was huge. It was huge. 💎

Resident Evil: Welcome to Raccoon City releases on November 24



FAMILY GAMES TO PLAY OVER THE HOLIDAYS

by Jill Grodt



Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury

Switch

Mario is always a great franchise when you need something entertaining for guests of all ages. While you'll find several other of the mustachioed plumber's titles on this list, Super Mario 3D Word + Bowser's Fury grabs the top spot for offering a fantastic, cooperative experience for up to four members of your family.



It Takes Two

PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC

Divorce is a bit of a heavy topic for a feel-good gathering, but this platformer is such a blast to play; it's sure to give your guests plenty to enjoy. You and a partner control May and Cody, a couple contemplating divorce, who have mysteriously turned into dolls and are now fighting to get back into their real bodies.



Animal Crossing: New Horizons

Switch

If you want good vibes for the whole family, what could be better than an island getaway? One Switch allows four players to start building up their own little beachy paradise, while up to eight people can get in on the fun if you have multiple devices and subscribe to Nintendo's online service.



Mario Kart 8 Deluxe

Switch

An absolute classic, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe brings this delightful racing competition, along with all its previous Wii U content, to the Switch. This is another title that can boost the player count up to eight if you have extra Switches and game copies, but you can still host four-player races on one console.



Jackbox Party Pack 8

PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

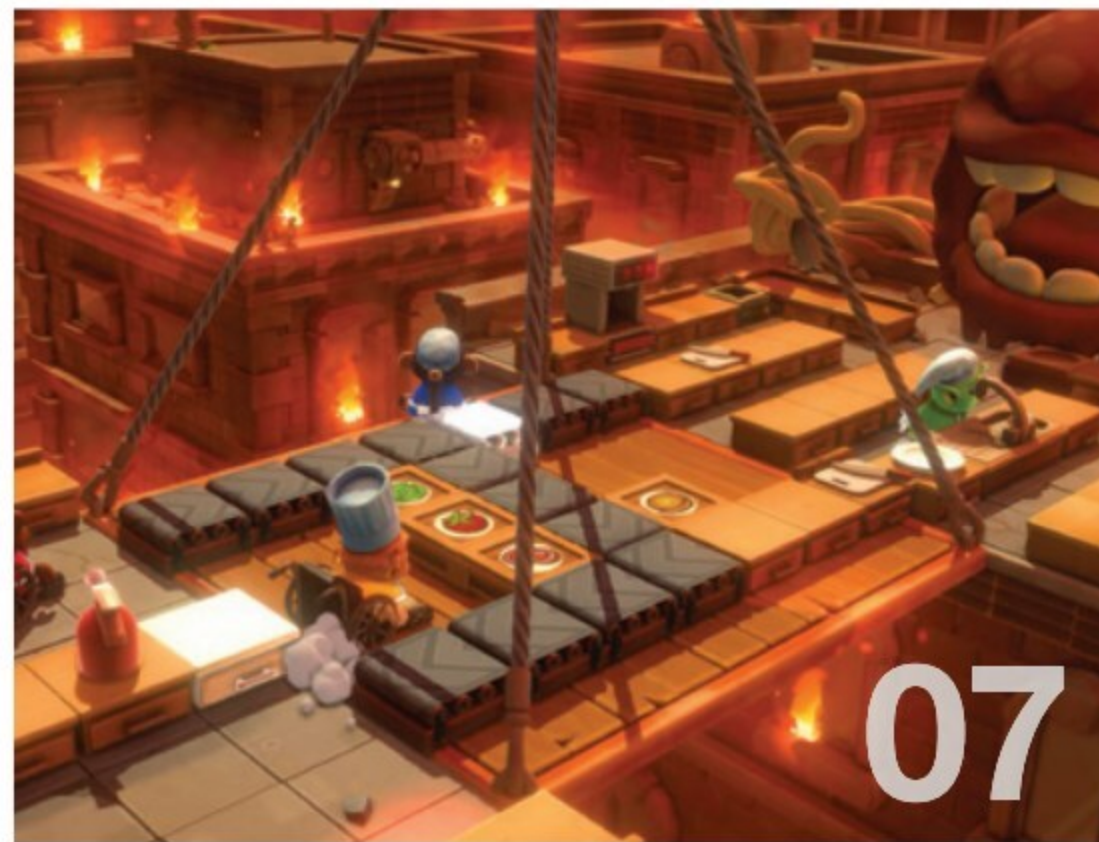
The latest Jackbox Party Pack is a must-have for extended get-togethers. Because it connects to smartphones, it's easy to get everyone in on the fun. And with humorous games asking you to explore your artistic side or answer trivia, there's bound to be something for everyone.



Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

Switch

Kingdom Hearts protagonist Sora was recently revealed as this densely-populated fighting game's last fighter. So, if you want to check out the Keyblade wielder's moveset, or just want to have fun destroying your relatives in a friendly brawl, you can't go wrong with Super Smash Bros. Ultimate.



Overcooked! All You Can Eat

PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

After gorging on all the plentiful food of the season, you and your stuffed kin can sit down to enjoy the virtual joys of food preparation in Overcooked! All You Can Eat. This bundle contains enhanced versions of both Overcooked titles and, while outwardly a cooperative game, it's sure to spark some lively discussion.



Mario Party Superstars

Switch

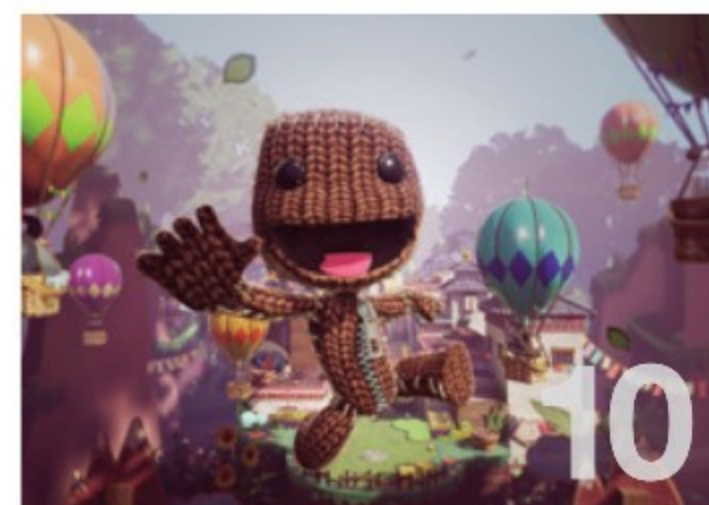
Mario Party Superstars brings together the most-loved boards, minigames, and characters from the long-running spin-off, giving you and your family a chance to walk down memory lane before siccing coin-stealing Chain Chomps on each other.



Untitled Goose Game

PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC

This adorable puzzler about terrorizing a neighborhood as a goose got a multiplayer mode back in 2020. While you and your partner in crime will have twice the fun stealing the townsfolk's stuff and startling them with your impressive honk, spectators can also help with solving its fun puzzles.



Sackboy: A Big Adventure

PS5, PS4

Jump, swing, and punch your way through this crafty adventure with three teammates in Sackboy: A Big Adventure's couch co-op. But choose your platforming partners wisely because the chaos only increases the more characters you have on screen. So, which is your favorite cousin? 🍪

GREAT ANIME BASED ON VIDEO GAMES

Sit back and indulge in your favorite gaming series in a new way

by Kimberley Wallace

Many video game franchises are ripe with fascinating characters that demand further exploration, and anime is often a natural fit to flesh out their stories and showcase those action-packed battles in pure cinematic form. But which ones are really worth your time? Some anime merely rehash the main narrative of their video game source material, while others flesh out characters with prequels or unique side stories. Truth be told, there's value and entertainment in all types, and we've picked some of our favorites for you to enjoy.



Persona 4: The Animation

Persona 3, 4, and 5 have all had anime adaptations and are a delight in their own right, but Persona 4 serves as the best of the bunch. Persona 4's cast was already a bit more lighthearted and fun to watch in-game, but the anime gets one new thing right: giving the previously silent main protagonist, Yu Narukami, more personality and development. From his shenanigans with Yosuke trying to pick up girls to bonding with the adorable Nanako, Yu is much more compelling in anime form – especially his deadpan snark. The anime follows the video game's story, with Yu moving to rural Inaba and learning of the Midnight Channel and its connection to recent deaths. It is based on Golden, the enhanced Persona 4 port, which introduced new characters and new bonding scenes, so you can expect to see the fun snow trip and faces like Marie.



Castlevania

This Netflix series is merely influenced by Japanese animation and Ayami Kojima's artwork, but it rightfully deserves a spot on this list as it's one of the better video game adaptations in the animation space. The first two seasons adapt Konami's 1989 hit Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse, focusing on Trevor Belmont, Alucard, and Sypha Belnades as they contend with Dracula and his army of demons. But the series isn't afraid to draw on other games, such as Castlevania: Curse of the Darkness for season two, and using Castlevania: Symphony of the Night for inspiration to flesh out Alucard's backstory. A standout voice cast and four mostly solid seasons make this one worth watching. The vampiric lore was already strong, but Netflix's *Castlevania* fully embraces it and has a refreshing self-awareness that makes it all work.



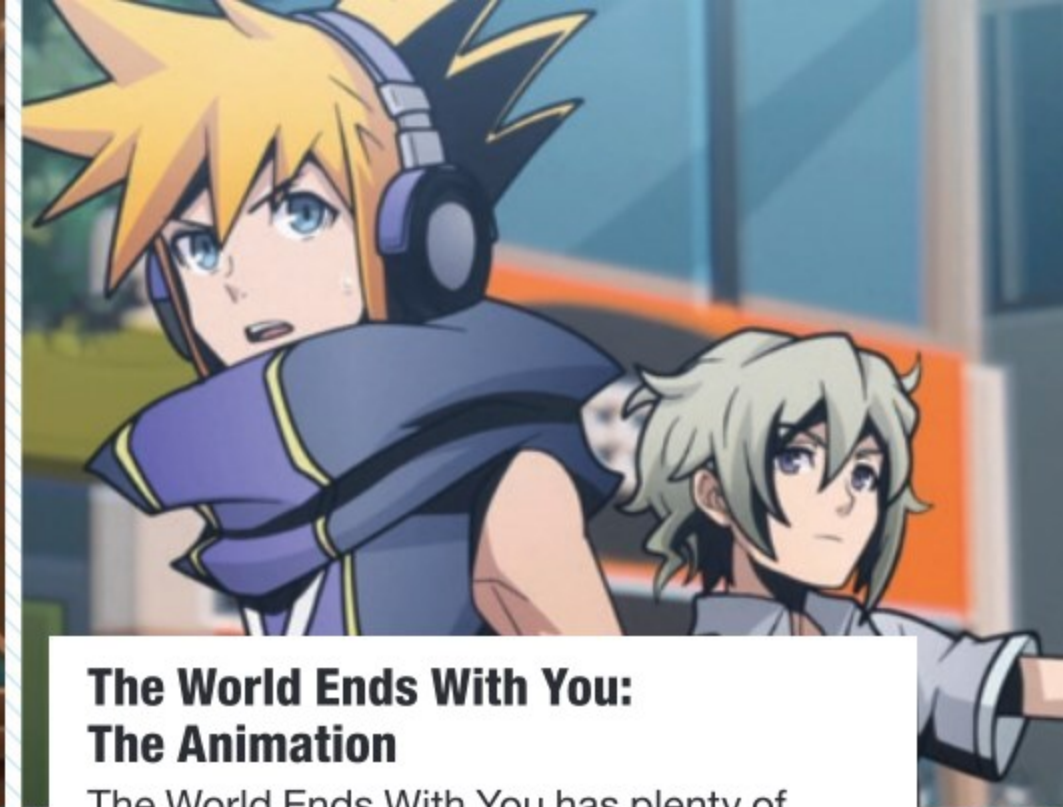
Street Fighter II: The Animated Movie

An oldie but goodie, we couldn't resist including the movie based on the game that gave rise to the Street Fighter frenzy and popularity. It's also a darn good animated movie, showcasing the sides of good and evil as we know it in the series. The movie centers on series mainstay Ryu as he continues to dominate on the fighting scene and garner more rivalries. However, things get more complicated when a mysterious crime syndicate, Shadowlaw, led by M. Bison, brings more dangers to the acclaimed fighter and other familiar franchise faces, such as Chun-Li, Guile, and Ken. The adrenaline-pumping fights and realistic action remain a highlight, as well as the fleshed-out backstories for many iconic characters. Fun fact: Many elements and designs from the movie were integrated into future Street Fighter games, including a nod to that intense Ryu/Ken showdown in Street Fighter Alpha 3.



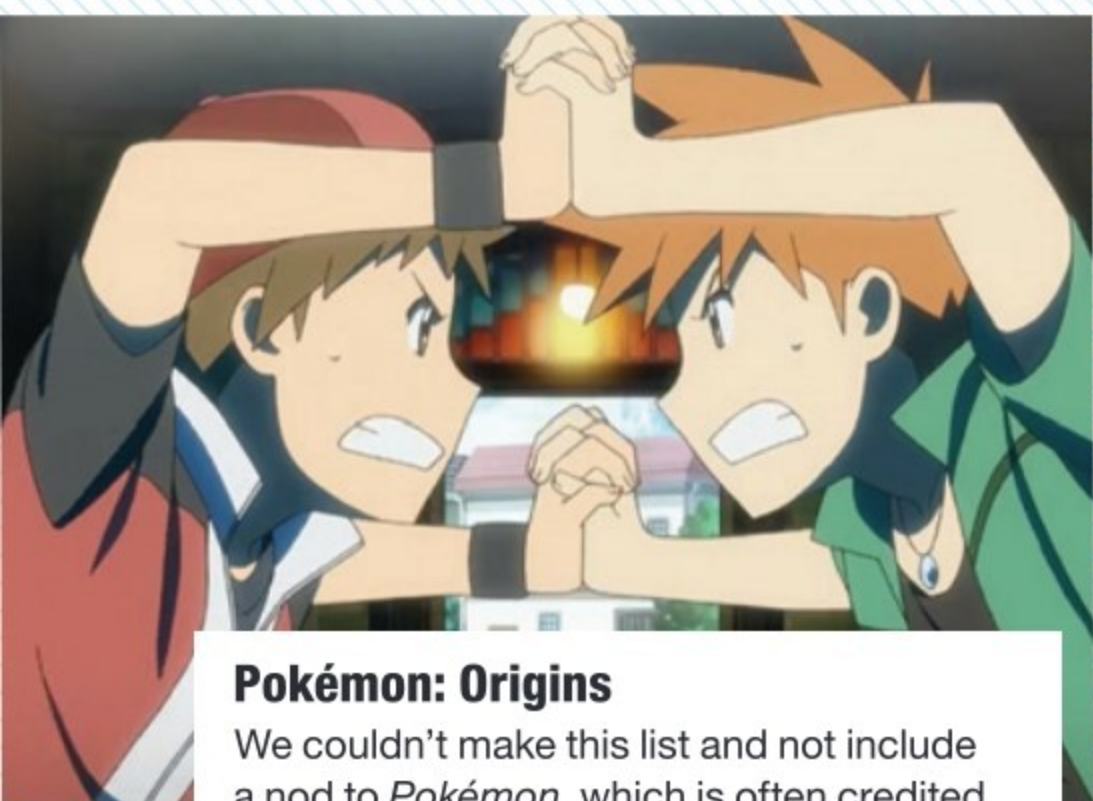
Ace Attorney

The Phoenix Wright trilogy set the stage for the Ace Attorney series, reaching a high bar with its charismatic cast, silly cases, and surprising twists. The Ace Attorney anime is just another way to experience or relive all the great moments from the first three games, as it is a very faithful recreation of the subject matter. Watch Phoenix Wright open his law office's doors, bond with his spirit-channeling assistant Maya, and face the undeniably ruthless Miles Edgeworth. The anime showcases Phoenix's past and includes all the over-the-top witnesses, from talkative security officer Wendy Oldbag to fierce photographer Lotta Hart. Come for the humorous hijinks Phoenix gets wrapped up in, but stay for the emotional revelations and the realization that the characters are just making the best out of the worst situations.



The World Ends With You: The Animation

The World Ends With You has plenty of style and sick beats, and this anime is your chance to learn more about Neku's story. It provides a concise way to experience the basic plot points of the original game, albeit with some slight differences, like using smartphones instead of flip phones, for modern times. If you need a refresher or have only played the recent sequel Neo: The World Ends With You, this is an excellent opportunity to see what was so powerful about Neku's journey and learn more about previous characters. The anime especially shines a light on the different Reapers and their motivations, and it's a bit darker in tone. Not only do the visuals look slick, but the action sequences are also fantastic. Bonus: the series' catchy music is also there to enhance the experience.



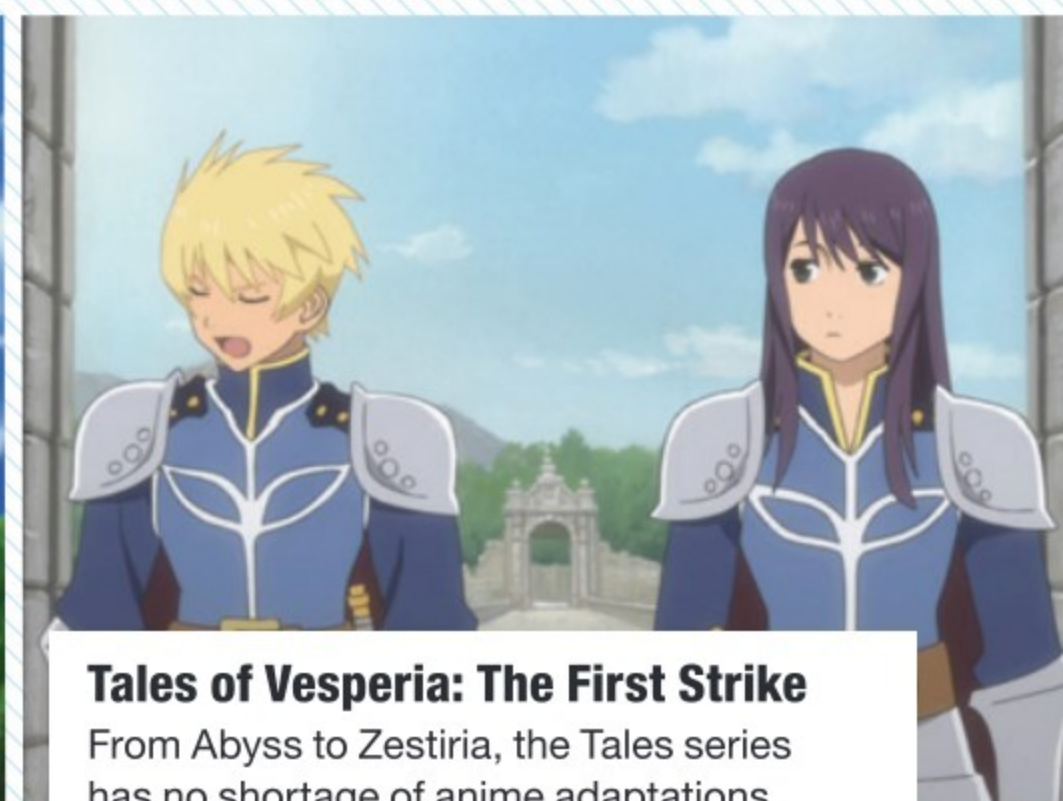
Pokémon: Origins

We couldn't make this list and not include a nod to *Pokémon*, which is often credited for helping popularize anime worldwide. The television series has more ongoing episodes than we know what to do with, but instead of pointing to those, we want to highlight a wonderful spin-off called *Origins*. This 90-minute special closely follows the plot of Pokémon Red and Blue, featuring characters and settings from it. Unlike the main series, it doesn't star trainer Ash Ketchum, but instead has a different protagonist with Red and his rival Blue. The anime takes us from Red capturing his first Pokémon and winning the Pokémon League to his pursuit of the mythical Pokémon Mew. For those who want to watch Pokémon anime, but don't want the demands of trying to keep up with the main series' 1,000-plus episodes, this is a great alternative that pays homage to the subject matter and video game mechanics wonderfully.



Dragon Quest: The Adventure of Dai

The Dragon Quest series has an undeniable classic feel, and *The Adventure of Dai* fully captures that nostalgia with iconic monsters, sounds, and spells to keep fans smiling. Based on the manga series of the same name written by Riku Sanjo and illustrated by Koji Inada, the anime stars an unlikely hero named Dai, who was raised on a peaceful, remote island with monsters, who he also calls friends. With an innocence and heart of gold, Dai learns of the evils of the world as a demon threatens everything he holds dear. Seeing Dai figure out what it really means to be a hero is heartwarming, but there's also plenty of fantastic reveals, such as the true evil force behind the demon's arrival and Dai's own hidden powers surfacing during big moments. Great music, stellar monster designs, and a fantastic script that stays true to the manga make this a story not to miss if you have affection for Dragon Quest in any capacity.



Tales of Vesperia: The First Strike

From Abyss to Zestiria, the Tales series has no shortage of anime adaptations, but prequel movie *Tales of Vesperia: The First Strike* adds fantastic backstory to an already beloved cast. The story centers on knights Yuri Lowell and Flynn Scifo, who couldn't be more different but must work together to protect their town from deadly monsters. The movie shows Yuri's reluctance to work with others and follow orders, with some terrific scenes showcasing his carefree attitude and the consequences it can bring. At the same time, you also see Yuri contend with the difficult decisions he must make in battle. However, let's be honest, the real reason to watch is to see Repede as a puppy and learn how the pipe-smoking dog became Yuri's ride or die. 💎



20 YEARS OF LIBERTY CITY

A conversation with
Rockstar North's
art director about
the game that
changed everything

BY BLAKE HESTER

In October 2001, Rockstar Games released Grand Theft Auto III – and the entire pop-culture paradigm shifted.

It's hard to say anything about GTA III that hasn't been said a million times over the last 20 years, but suffice it to say, it laid a blueprint for open-world games so complete that the game industry still largely follows it today.

To celebrate the game's 20th anniversary, we recently talked to Rockstar North art director Aaron Garbut over email about his time working on GTA III, what it meant for Rockstar as a company, and its overall legacy in 2021.

How did DMA/Rockstar evolve its technology to the point where GTA III was possible? Can you walk me through how you all got to that point?

There was no evolution technology-wise. Grand Theft Auto III was a new team in a new studio, excited by the possibilities of newer consoles and pushing to create an immersive world in 3D. We didn't build this on existing technology but grew it from the ground up over the life of the project.

We just wanted to build a world that was as alive and open as we could make it and give players the toolset and flexibility to explore and play in that world. We built narrative and game flow structures to push them on a path and give them direction, but fundamentally it was openness and player freedom we were excited by. The challenge we were trying to solve – and are still working on – is fundamentally, how do we build a place that's interesting to exist in and give the player enough toys and systems to interact with and mess about? There are clear technical challenges with that – building a diverse, large urban world, and ensuring that it would stream in so that we could build in the variation and scale we wanted. The fact that we wanted it to feel alive and to feel as much as possible like the player existed in it – rather than at the center of it – meant we needed to have the world active even when the player was on a mission or causing chaos. We needed systems that were as solid as possible, and that could also scale in complexity. Fundamentally, we designed what we thought we wanted to play ourselves, and then we figured out how the hell to make it.

Do you remember any of the earliest iterations or prototypes you saw of GTA III?

When we finished our first game at DMA Design, we had some time to prototype and come up with ideas. We also got access to a couple of Dreamcast devkits. Over several weeks,

we managed to create a number of blocks of a city with docks, retail areas, and brownstones. We were playing, really, but we added characters walking the streets and cars driving around.

I think we got into some conversations with some of the original GTA code team about GTA in 3D and got dismissed as being too complex. They had been working on some experiments pushing the camera back a bit in the old GTA engine, but that was very far away from where we were trying to go. We were enjoying ourselves; we were young and arrogant and made a conscious decision to redirect the project to be GTA – we knew we could do it, and it had a lot more appeal to us.

During those early days, shortly after we had moved to Edinburgh, we would meet regularly with Sam [Houser, founder of Rockstar Games], who had been desperate to move GTA to fully 3D for a long time. We had known him from the last project we had worked on, but we got a lot closer quickly during the early days of GTA III. We were all very in sync right from the start. We're still largely heading in the same direction we started on way back then.

Twenty years later, what do you think is the overall legacy of GTA III?

I think GTA III was a glimpse into what was possible in open-world games. It showed that games could be more about the player than the designer – that we could build worlds of ever-increasing diversity, granularity, and complexity, and create complex systems that players could interact with. That we could stop thinking about levels and start thinking more about worlds, about cohesive spaces, with characters living inside them alongside our player. That we could fill these worlds with interest and leave it for the player to discover and interact. That we could build toys and tools, worlds and systems for the player to play with. But also, that more than all of those things – more than the toys, the living, breathing world, the systems and the

like – that we could create a sense of place and the players could be happy just to be. To sit in their car, listen to music, and watch the sunset. It was the idea that with the right complexity and believability comes variety, not just in what the players can do but what they want to do. If the world is complex enough, it exists to pull players into it to experience such a breadth of content and possibility that the players themselves define what they can and will do. That's a long way from what games were before GTA III, but it's a journey we've been on ever since.

In the two decades since, what does GTA III mean to Rockstar North as a development studio?

GTA III set the template for how we make games. We [learned] so much from it, but mainly, we just learned how hard it was. Creating worlds with the density of detail and content we wanted that could be navigated at speed has all sorts of complications. Having the content exist in that world alongside open-world systems – the ambient world, cops, gangs, and the like, creates even more complications. I guess we learned that we weren't afraid to take a hard path if we felt the results were worth it. And the approach of systems interacting to create complexity is something we continue to build on.

This is one of those weird questions where there's no modest way to ask it, but few people get to work on anything in their life that changes pop culture. Do you ever think about that? If so, how do you reflect?

It's an odd thing, a slightly abstract thing, really. My day-to-day life before and after GTA III has been focused on how to build the most immersive, expansive, and diverse games we can make. We always have the last game we made as the benchmark we need to push further to make something better. It's never about how these games have been perceived culturally, critically, or commercially; it's about what we ourselves loved about the last thing we made and how we can build on that.

From Grand Theft Auto III to Red Dead Redemption II, each of them has felt like the continuation of the same journey, and each is approached with a new sense of ambition. It's fun and funny to see your work blow up in pop culture, to see references to it. It's always mind-blowing to look at player stats and imagine the sheer aggregate time spent in our worlds. But beyond that, we are just incredibly grateful to get to make things we think are cool and that so many others agree enough to spend so much time with them. 🍷



Aaron Garbut has worked for Rockstar since 1996. In his time with the company, he's had a hand in the creation of games like Grand Theft Auto III, the Red Dead Redemption series, Max Payne 3, L.A. Noire, and more



The Outcast

COMES HOME

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF EDMUND MCMILLEN

We speak with the man behind such indie classics as *The Binding of Isaac* and *Super Meat Boy* to learn about his inspirations, humble beginnings, and sky-high aspirations BY BRIAN SHEA

Over the last two decades, Edmund McMillen has made a name for himself in the game industry as one of the preeminent hitmakers in the independent development scene. Whether you're talking about his early days churning out cult-classic games with Adobe Flash or his mainstream success with titles like *Super Meat Boy* and *The Binding of Isaac*, McMillen is one of the greatest success stories to come out of the millennium's early indie boom. And yet, through all this success, McMillen has felt like an outcast.

We sat down with McMillen for an extended conversation to learn about the unique path the artist and designer took to become one of the most successful independent game developers of this era.

NEW PATHS TO NEWGROUNDS

McMillen has long felt like he doesn't belong. Hailing from Watsonville in Santa Cruz County, California, McMillen mostly grew up with his grandmother. His mom's side of the family, including his grandmother, consisted of devout Catholics, while members of his dad's side were what he called "A.A. Christians," or born-again Christians recovering from addiction.

"I didn't fit in really anywhere in my family," says McMillen. "I just felt like a giant weirdo. The closest thing to me was my grandma. Nobody else really had any interest in art. My dad sang in a Journey cover band, but other than singers, there weren't artists, illustrators, or creative types."

To this day, McMillen is a massive fan of music, even calling it a bigger inspiration on him than other media. As he sports a Nine Inch Nails t-shirt, he rattles off his favorite bands, including The Smashing Pumpkins and The Breeders. McMillen says he found himself drawn to the level of independence musicians have when crafting their art and the way they can express themselves.

"That was the thing I always strived for as an artist: the idea that this small group of people could sit down and do and write whatever the f--- they wanted, and then thousands of people

would hear it and could enjoy it was just so cool to me," he says. "That's what I wanted primarily – the same thing for animation and anything that I was doing. I wanted my voice to be heard so desperately."

McMillen floated through high school, feeling like he didn't fit in there either. However, he loved drawing, so he started self-publishing comics. Following a rejection letter from an indie comic publisher, McMillen had a fire lit under him. "It was one of those failures that motivated me heavily," he says. "Not only did I want to show them up, and show them what they missed, but also, I got real and was like, 'Okay, if I want to continue doing this, I can't just keep printing 50 comics at Kinko's and selling them at Streetlight [Records in Santa Cruz].'"

This led him to begin taking classes at a community college to learn web design to create a website to showcase his comics to a broader audience. He transitioned to putting his work online, with Flash becoming his weapon of choice thanks to its popularity as a web tool at the time. Shortly after, McMillen discovered Newgrounds.com, which hosts user-created games, movies, and other content.

His first taste of success as a game developer came with *Dead Baby Dressup!*, a series of interactive Flash games based on his comics.

He bought a domain for his comic series, *This is a Cry for Help*, and began experimenting more with Flash and implementing interactive elements.

"I didn't choose games; games chose me," he says, laughing. "I wanted to make comics. The thing is, even on Newgrounds, my animations didn't do that well; it was my games that did well."

His work eventually caught the eye of Tom Fulp, founder of Newgrounds. "He promoted my work pretty heavily and showed me the way," McMillen says. "I didn't know I was making games, even when I was making Flash games back then. There wasn't even a category for games yet. They were just considered Flash animations that have interactivity to them."

McMillen and Fulp began working on a game McMillen designed, but Fulp had to stop working on it to focus on another game called *Alien Hominid*. Fulp had grander ambitions for *Alien Hominid* than publishing it on Newgrounds; he wanted to bring the game to consoles. McMillen couldn't wrap his head around the idea of getting a game made in Flash to consoles, but Fulp had his mind set on it.

To accomplish this, Fulp co-founded a studio called The Behemoth. McMillen's collaboration with Fulp on that project fell through, but the success Fulp and The Behemoth experienced with *Alien Hominid* and *Castle Crashers* served as early showcases for what indie games could accomplish in the home console market.

McMillen still didn't feel like he entirely fit in despite the attention and audience he found online through sites like Newgrounds. Instead, he felt somewhat of a rivalry with other creators on the site, which drove him to become better at his craft. Over his first decade in development, McMillen created nearly 40 games, some of which were collaborations with other programmers within that same community. But, like Fulp, McMillen was thinking beyond Newgrounds.

CARNIVOROUS CONSOLE CONCEPTION

In the late 2000s, McMillen compiled what he refers to as a portfolio of sorts, containing all of his games, comics, and animations on one disc, which he, alongside his wife Danielle, sold out of their house. He saw what his fellow indie devs achieved through the newly established Xbox Live Arcade and wanted in on the gold rush. “Suddenly, my peers were becoming millionaires, and they were having these options for their futures, and I would really like the same,” he says.

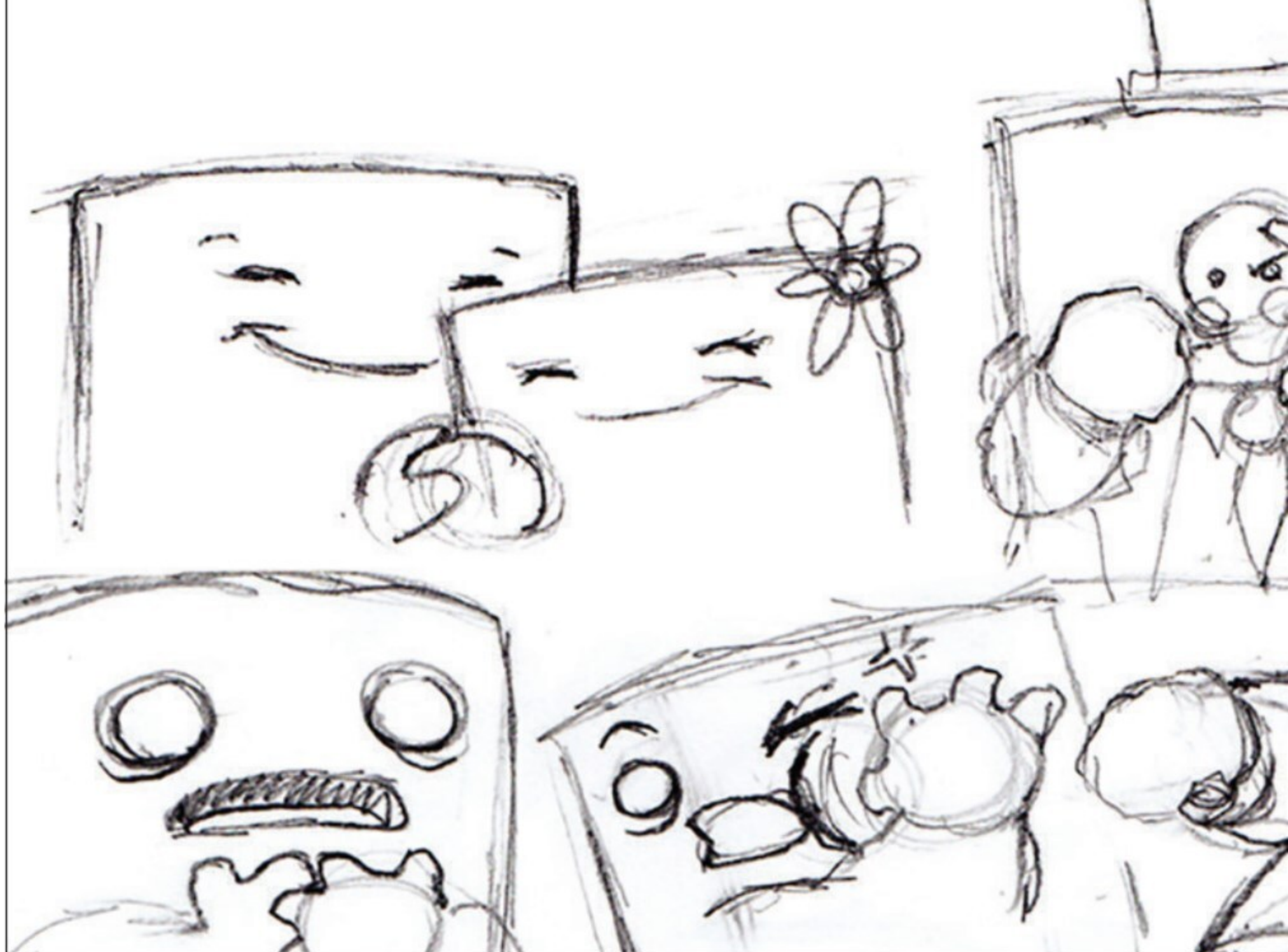
One day, McMillen received an email from then-Epic Games designer Cliff Bleszinski telling him he bought his disc and liked what he saw. McMillen viewed this as his chance to get his foot in the door with the console market, and upon request, Bleszinski gave him contacts at Microsoft and Nintendo.

After sending emails to both, McMillen received an enthusiastic response from the Xbox Live Arcade team. McMillen initially pitched them on a remake of one of his most successful games: Gish. McMillen reached out to original Gish co-designer Alex Austin and Tommy Refenes, another programmer he met through Newgrounds, to work on the XBLA version.

However, as the Gish project began, things quickly headed in the wrong direction, and development halted, with McMillen departing the team. Despite this, McMillen knew this was his big chance, and he couldn’t just walk away from the opportunity, so he began looking at what his most successful recent Flash games were. The one that stuck out to him was a 2D platforming game called Meat Boy.

“It had eclipsed all of my other games as far as views go, and it was the most mainstream-appealing game on the internet that I had done,” McMillen says. “It was the most simplistic as well; it was a platformer, so it didn’t even involve physics. It was just straightforward.”

McMillen pitched a Meat Boy port to the Xbox Live Arcade team and asked Refenes to program it. When all parties agreed to it and development started, Super Meat Boy was born. As release neared in 2010, Microsoft informed



McMillen and Refenes, or Team Meat as they’d become known, that the sales projections for Super Meat Boy were low thanks to it being a 2D game. Despite this notion, Super Meat Boy was bolstered by strong reviews and Team Meat’s grassroots promotional efforts.

McMillen’s highest hope for the game before release was that it would sell enough that he and his wife could afford a mobile home in Santa Cruz. According to McMillen, the sales helped him hit that mark in the first couple of weeks, and when the dust had settled (and the housing market crashed around that same time), he was able to afford something far nicer than his original target.

Super Meat Boy sold hundreds of thousands of copies and gave McMillen mainstream recognition and a certified hit on consoles.

THE UNBINDING OF EDMUND

To this day, Super Meat Boy is a beloved title synonymous with McMillen, but rather than create a sequel, he wanted to forge new paths. “[The success] screwed with me a little bit because there was an expectation,” he says. “Everybody wants a sequel, and the first thing I said was I would never make one. I would never make a sequel to Super Meat Boy because how could I do it better than that?”

Unfortunately, that’s where he and Refenes differed. According to McMillen, Refenes wanted to make it into a franchise (and he did, eventually releasing Super Meat Boy Forever under the Team Meat moniker in 2020), but McMillen didn’t find the idea of a sequel creatively gripping, and it led to a rift between the two. “I think we were just moving in very different directions, and we wanted very different things,” McMillen says. “The option was there to do The Binding of Isaac as a Team Meat game, but Tommy did not want to. I think he wanted to work on more Meat Boy stuff, which he did. I found out quickly that we were extremely different people.”

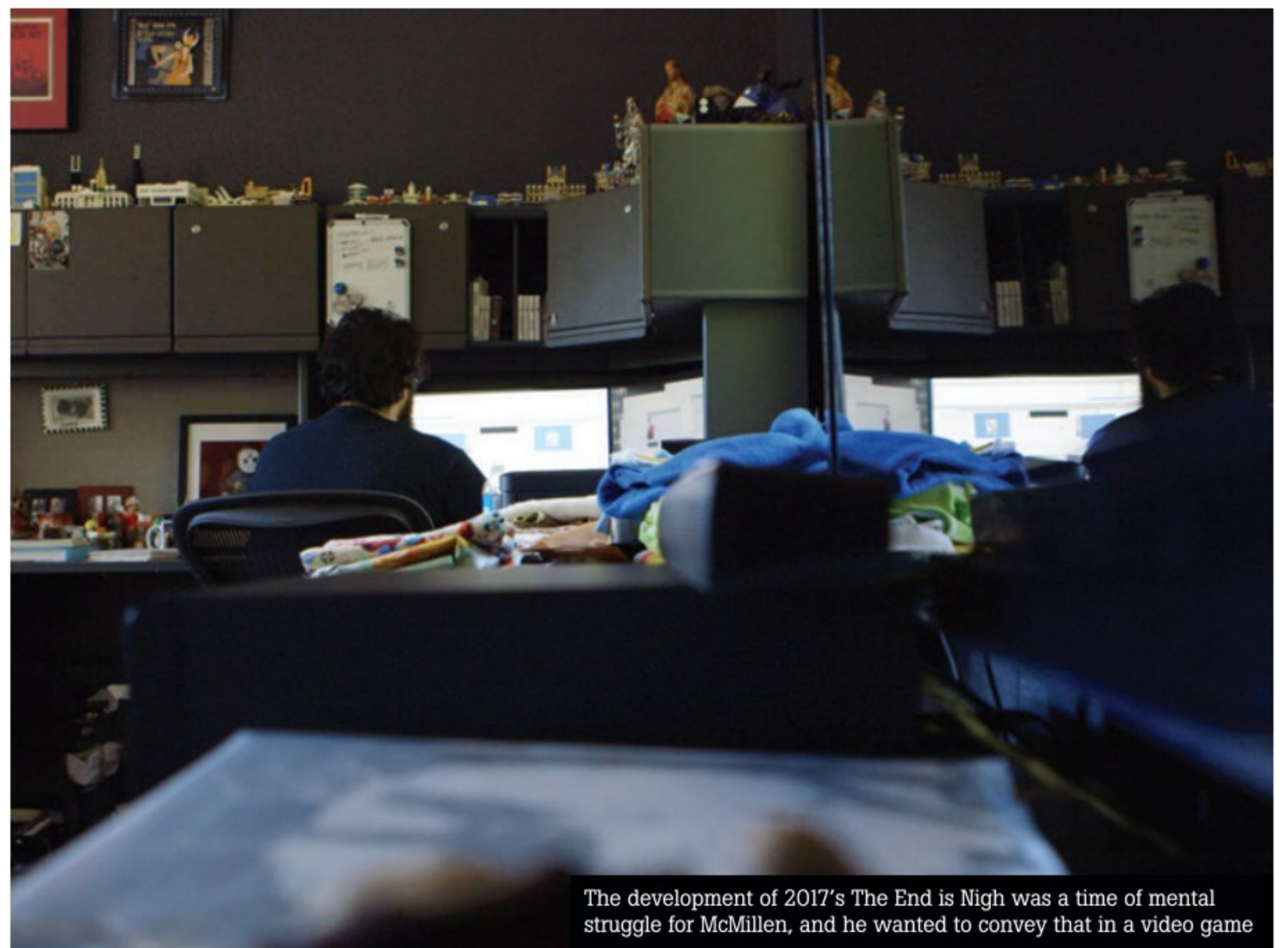
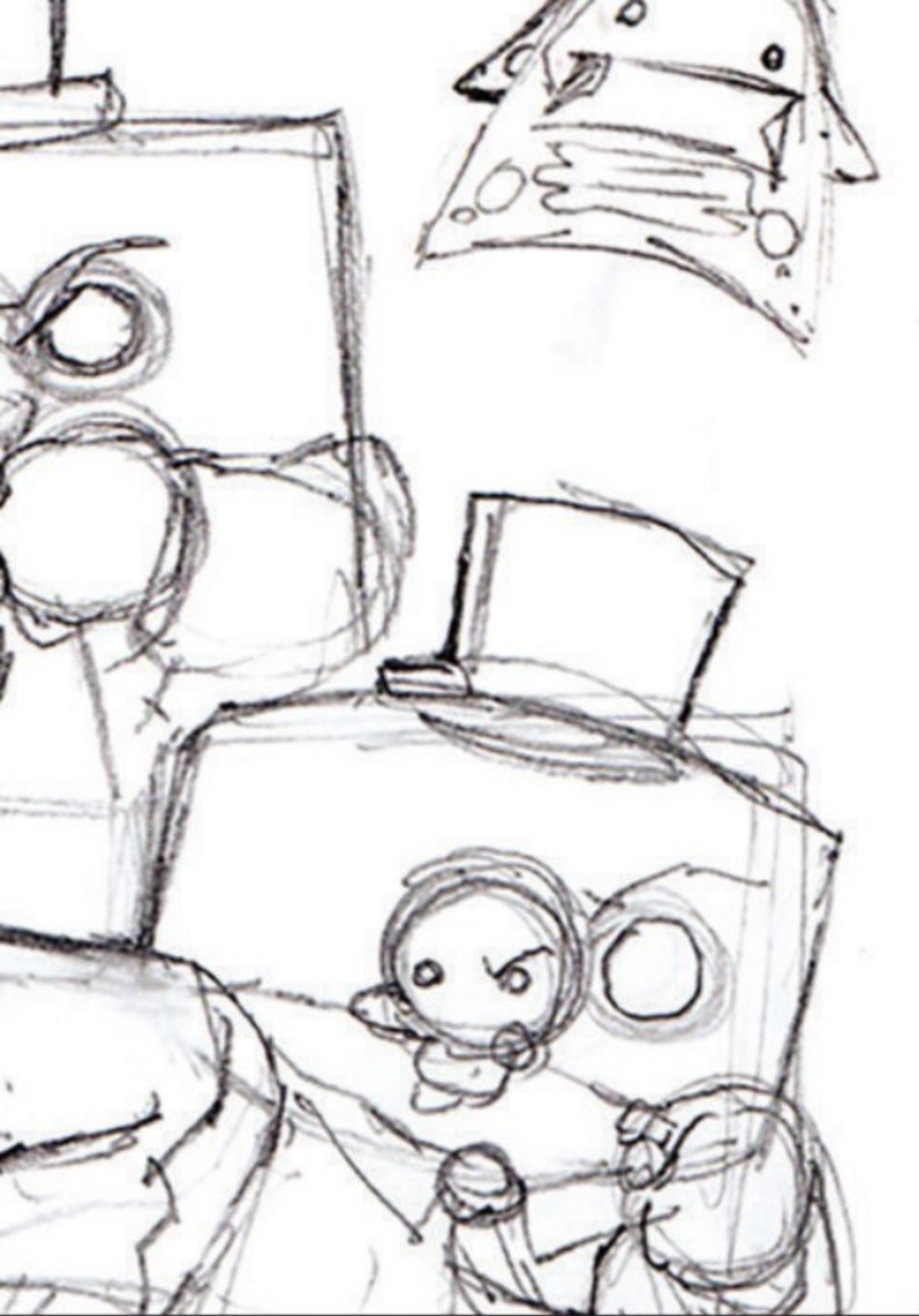
Shortly thereafter, McMillen left Team Meat to resume developing games under his name. His instinctual reaction to these expectations of a sequel or franchise was to defy them and begin work on something completely different less than nine months after Super Meat Boy. The result was The Binding of Isaac, a top-down roguelike game that takes inspiration from The Legend of Zelda series.

“I wanted to get back to the headspace of not caring about money, like in the Flash days, not caring about ESRB rating, not caring about who I may or may not be upsetting, not caring about impressing some faceless suit, or whatever else; just do whatever I want to do,” he says. “Even though I didn’t make huge compromises with Super Meat Boy, it was me playing it safe because I knew what was on the line, and I knew what I was risking.”

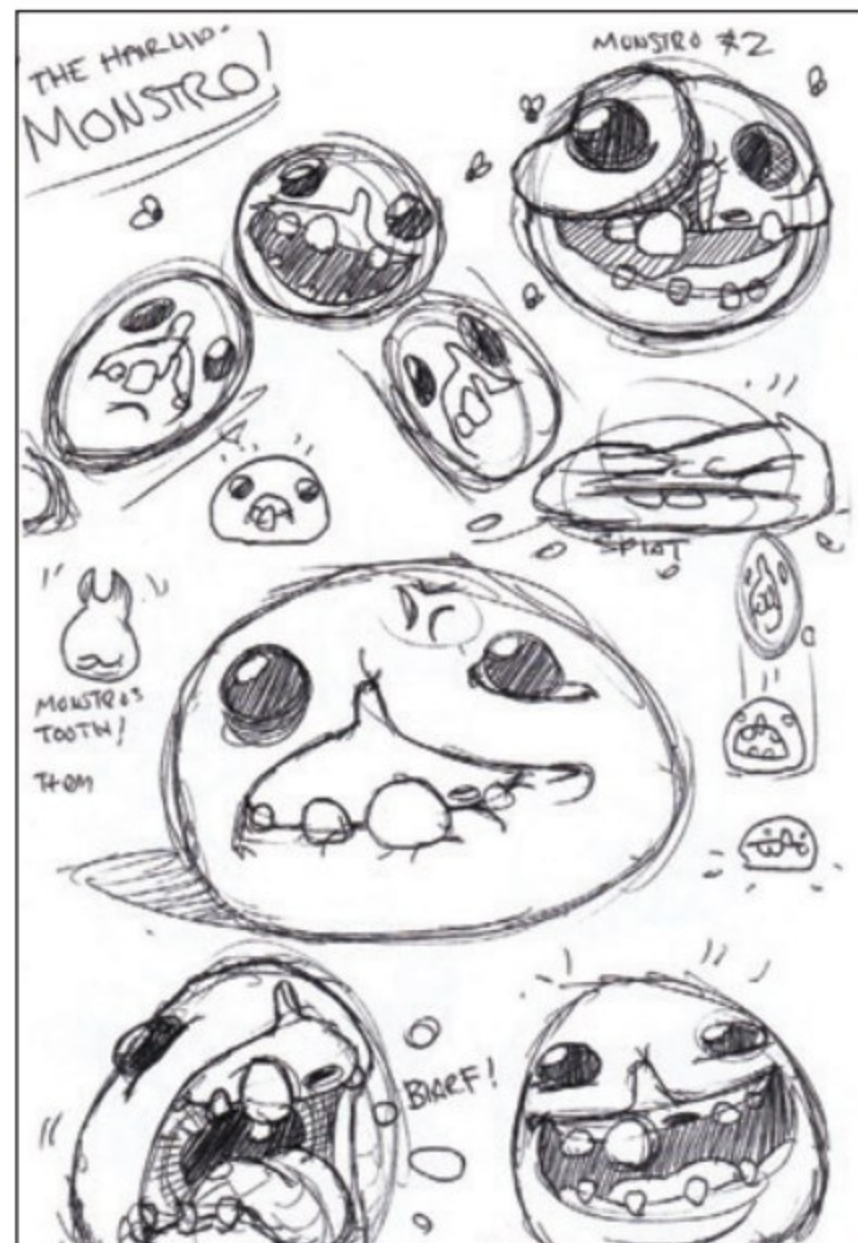
To work on The Binding of Isaac, McMillen reignited a previous collaboration with Florian Himsl,



McMillen shows Super Meat Boy to then-president at Nintendo of America, Reggie Fils-Aimé



The development of 2017's *The End is Nigh* was a time of mental struggle for McMillen, and he wanted to convey that in a video game



a Newgrounds programmer he worked with on several Flash titles in the 2000s. The Binding of Isaac draws heavily from McMillen's experiences as a child, delving into topics of religious fanaticism, feeling like an outcast, and the worlds we escape to in our minds during challenging times.

For this project, McMillen returned to his favorite source of inspiration: music. "There's something about how music is written that speaks to me a little bit more than traditional game design," he says. "Kind of in the way that the story and the theme of *The Binding of Isaac* is written more like the lyrics of a song with visuals than it is a traditional story in a book or movie. I pull more from that: more from abstract poetry and words to set the tone that gives you these little empty spaces that you can fill in, instead of this drawn-out explanation of everything in a story structure."

The Binding of Isaac launched in 2011 and has sold millions of copies and continued to grow through multiple releases across its decade of existence. McMillen initially decided to expand on the game because his wife got really into playing it, and he wanted to create more content for her. However, the personal nature of the game drove him to continue creating in the universe, even releasing a prequel deck-building game called *The Legend of Bum-bo* and a Kickstarter-funded tabletop game called *The Binding of Isaac: Four Souls* amidst the various main-game expansions.

"[*The Binding of Isaac* is] the only game I think I've worked on that I've been so brutally honest, and I want so desperately to paint this picture of what it's like to grow up as a poor, single-parent household's kid, who's a creative weirdo and doesn't fit in anywhere," he says.

"Writing from that perspective and being able to tell that story in an abstract sense felt very important."

Despite the continued focus on *The Binding of Isaac*, McMillen continued working on new games, once again linking up with an old Newgrounds collaborator. McMillen reconnected with Tyler Glaiel, with whom he had worked on various Newgrounds titles years prior. Together, they released *The Basement Collection*, a 2012 compilation of McMillen's old Flash titles for PC, Mac, and Linux.

Five years after *The Basement Collection*, McMillen and Glaiel joined up to create *The End is Nigh*. Thanks to its gameplay style and punishing difficulty, many drew comparisons to *Super Meat Boy*. While the parallels are easy to make, McMillen thinks *The End is Nigh* stands above the rest of his catalog.

“It’s the most beautifully elegant game that I’ve ever made,” he says. “In a lot of ways, The End is Nigh was my version of Super Meat Boy that was more true to who I am and more brutally honest about where I was in the world at that time.”

Just as he did with The Binding of Isaac, McMillen wrote autobiographically, this time dealing with his struggles with mental health. “I wanted it to feel like you’re riddled with anxiety at all times, and it felt like this looming, horrible darkness over you and that you’re always waiting for the next shoe to drop, and it never does,” he says. “I wanted you to feel panic. I wanted you to feel anxiety. I was not feeling mentally well at the time, and I wanted to simulate that in a game form.”

Oddly enough, McMillen thought that The Binding of Isaac, with its abstract ideas and more difficult-to-describe premises, would be his cult hit, but it turned out The End is Nigh was, as he describes it, his “arthouse midnight movie.”

The platformer launched in 2017, and the designer’s work again received positive reviews, but it did not receive the same mainstream attention as games like The Binding of Isaac. However, McMillen returned one last time to his biggest hit to release Repentance, the final planned expansion in Isaac’s journey. The 2021 expansion serves as a fitting bookend to the previous decade of McMillen’s career and the last foray into that world – at least for now.

“I’m done ... until I decide to make a sequel in like 10 years,” he says with a smirk. “I need to become a better designer. I need to grow more because I’ve had like five years of stagnation and kind of playing it safe with my projects that I’ve been doing.”

McMillen has found a new lease on design through Mew-Genics, a revitalized project from his Team Meat days that he describes as a combination of Pokémon, Animal Crossing, Final Fantasy Tactics, and Dungeons & Dragons. After shelving it for nearly 10 years, he’s again making good progress on it, once again joining forces with Glaiel. He estimates Mew-Genics is still about two years from release, but he’s happy with where he is on the project and how he’s once again growing as a designer.



A behind-the-scenes shot of McMillen during the filming of *Indie Game: The Movie*, a 2012 documentary that showcased the development of several independent games including Super Meat Boy

NO END IN SIGHT

As McMillen charts his path forward, he hopes to continue sharing the characters and worlds in his head with the same level of freedom and uncompromised vision as those musicians he admired growing up. Following the release of Mew-Genics, McMillen wants to take a few years off from big games and create smaller titles every few months to scratch his creative itches.

During his two decades making video games, McMillen has focused on creating the kinds of experiences he’s wanted to make – with minimal compromise – rather than what would appeal to a mainstream audience. The approach

has worked for him, as he has forged his own path to create unforgettable experiences, with any fame or fortune largely being a side effect of the work he produced.

McMillen may still feel like somewhat of an outcast, but perhaps that’s precisely why his work resonates with so many people. When you combine that notion with brutally honest writing, striking visuals, rock-solid gameplay, and inspiration drawn from some of the greatest games of all time, it’s a recipe for why critics and fans alike continue to eagerly anticipate his work and welcome his creations into their lives time and time again. 💎



AVAILABLE AT GAMESTOP



BATTLE YOUR FRIENDS WITH THESE FOUR AWESOME ROBLOX-INSPIRED NERF BLASTERS

Roblox is a virtual world-building platform that stimulates the imaginations of millions of kids and adults alike all over the world. Never before has it been so easy to jump into thousands of fun and unique games with friends all while using the same avatar across experiences. And for the most ambitious players, you can even download Roblox Studio and make your own games to share with friends or the entire world.

And the best part about Roblox is that it's entirely free across PC, mobile, and Xbox so there's nothing stopping you from hopping on to play some games. Honestly, the metaverse has already arrived and its denizens have blocks for heads.

Any parent of a kid aged 15 or younger undoubtedly is familiar with the digital frontier of Roblox. Naturally, it makes sense for the folks behind one of the world's most popular video games to team up with the folks behind one of the world's most popular toy brands.

When you're done bringing your ideas to life virtually in Roblox, you can actually hold and use real Nerf guns based on the Roblox worlds you already know and love. For this line, Hasbro created unique blasters based on iconic Roblox games.

Nerf Roblox MM2: Shark Seeker Blaster ❶

First up is the MM2: Shark Seeker Blaster. This Nerf product is based on the popular Roblox game, *Murder Mystery 2 (MM2)* which pits players against one another in a tense social experiment to uncover the murderer in a sea of strangers--similar to another popular video game, *Among Us*.

Some players are marked as "Innocents" who must hide and survive for the duration of the game while one other person is marked as the "Sheriff" and can take down the Murderer before any Innocents are taken out. It's a clever game that involves lots of trickery.

The Shark Seeker Blaster is an awesome toy thanks to the stylish and original design. You can mash down on the fin placed on top to prime the blaster after loading a dart in the chamber and feel the satisfying click as you fire off shots. Each blaster comes with three Nerf Mega darts so you should have enough ammo to hold your friends at bay and keep them on their toes before needing to reload.

Nerf Roblox Adopt Me!: Bees! Blaster ❷

Next in line is the Bees! Blaster, based on the insanely popular *Adopt Me!* game in Roblox, which has been played over 26 billion times by Roblox players all over the world. In the game, players get to adopt adorable animals, decorate their houses, and hang out with friends online in a simulated world that's free from the stress and responsibilities of real life.

The blaster based on this game is stylized to look like it was just dipped into an oozing beehive that's dripping with honey. The orange honey mold across the top is drenched in an aesthetic that really elevates this Nerf blaster's style.

If the visual attention to detail wasn't enough to sell you, the Bees! Blaster is primed for battle for anyone looking to unload some serious firepower. With an 8-dart rotation drum, you can fire off enough darts to take down a whole squad of your friends without ever needing to stop and reload. You just have to move the lever before each shot to rotate the drum and prepare the next shot.

Nerf Roblox Arsenal Pulse Laser Motorized Blaster ❸

Now if you'd rather kick it old school and grab your kids a Nerf blaster that's pulled right out of one of the most popular traditional first-person shooters on Roblox, then look no further than the Pulse Laser Motorized Blaster, based on the immensely popular Roblox game, *Arsenal*.

Regardless of what type of action you're looking for, whether it be handheld single-shot blasters or automatic motorized guns with loads of darts, the new line of Roblox-themed Nerf blasters has you covered.

And as a neat bonus, you even get a special redemption code that can be used to acquire an in-game item inside Roblox included with each of the blasters mentioned here! Now load up your blasters with Nerf darts, take aim, take cover, and have some fun!

Note: All Nerf blasters and darts are tested and approved for performance, safety, and quality. All toys shown here may be used either indoors or outdoors for children age 8 and up. To avoid eye injury do not aim at faces and protective eyewear is recommended (not included.) Small parts may present a choking hazard, so please keep out of reach at all times for children under 3 years.

A lot of Roblox games are based on roleplaying or simulations, but *Arsenal* is just a straight up frag fest that harken back to the glory days of classic first-person shooters on PC. It's fast, frenetic, and fun gameplay minus all the blood and violence. In fact, it's a bit like a virtual Nerf blaster fight without the need to clean up all the darts afterward. That's a win-win scenario!

The Pulse Laser Motorized Blaster steps things up a notch by including a removable 10-dart clip that loads into the bottom of the blaster. With its motorized action, you'll need to supply your own set of four AA batteries to get the full effect. The rapid dart feeding system means you can shoot off all 10-darts in rapid succession before you ever need to reload.

Nerf Roblox Jailbreak: Armory Blaster Set ❹

The final Roblox Nerf item to discuss here is the Armory Blaster Set, which is of course based on the super popular Roblox game, *Jailbreak*. This is an award-winning Roblox game that already features big partnerships and license deals in-game, such as an upcoming event with NASCAR. This is definitely one that your kids (and/or you) are probably very familiar with already.

In *Jailbreak*, players can be either cops or criminals in an attempt to stop robberies or orchestrate heists depending on the role you're assigned. The developers have continually worked on the game for nearly five years to add new content, update existing parts of the game, and keep things as fresh as possible.

Unlike the other blasters on this list, the Armory Blaster Set is actually two one-handed blasters in one tidy package. These blasters have a single chamber to load individual darts one-at-a-time and are primed with a hammer-action lever at the back before each shot. Just load a dart, pull down the priming hammer, and pull the trigger. The Armory Set includes two blasters and 10 Official Nerf Elite darts so you've got plenty of ammo to work with. Or, you can share with a friend, split the darts, and re-create a match of *Jailbreak* in your backyard.

THE BEST XBOX CONTROLLERS FOR THE HOLIDAY

Which is the right fit for your Halo playthrough?

Microsoft changed very little about its core controller with the launch of the Xbox Series X/S, even as Sony made major revisions with its innovative DualSense. That's probably because the Xbox controller's form factor is especially well-liked. Even so, dedicated Xbox or PC players have several excellent options if they're ready to step up from the standard pack-in. **by Matt Miller**

1 Xbox Elite Wireless Controller Series 2 – Halo Infinite Limited Edition

If you're looking for the top of the line, it's hard to find fault with the Elite Series 2. Adding style to already stellar function, the swanky Halo LE features gorgeous Mjolnir armor green and a gold d-pad that recalls Master Chief's visor. Clever touches make the difference, like the "117" numerical tag, or the Echo-216 recharge station, just like the Pelican's callsign in the new game.

Whether you track down the hard-to-find limited edition or the less expensive all-black, you can expect the same high-end performance. Hair-trigger locks let you set your preferred pull distance. Swappable d-pads, multiple thumbstick heights (each with adjustable tension), and customizable back paddles provide plenty of flex. Rechargeable batteries (and lengthy battery life) for full wireless functionality will undoubtedly save you some battery costs. The wraparound rubber grip lends a premium feel and no slippage, even after hours of sweaty matches. Save and switch between multiple profiles with the press of a button, each with different button assignments. The Elite 2 is slightly heavier than most competitors, so be aware of that if you tend to play for long sessions. The hard case keeps all your pieces handily stored away.

It's a stellar all-around choice; venture elsewhere if you're looking for esports-tier competitive wired input response speeds, a less expensive upgrade, or a deviation from the classic form factor.

\$199.99 (Halo LE), \$149.99 (Black)
xbox.com

1



2 Xbox Wireless Controller – 20th Anniversary Special Edition

If you don't require back paddles, extensive customization, or other bells and whistles, there's no need to jump to high-priced alternatives. The standard new-generation wireless Xbox controller is a versatile and familiar companion that can ably keep you at the top of your game.

If you're cool with the baseline function, but wouldn't mind a fresh coat of paint, the coolest option this year is the translucent 20th anniversary release – a direct nod to those earliest translucent green Xbox consoles from two decades ago. For the slight uptick in price, you also get some nice textured back grips. Don't pay for more than what you want; stick with the tried-and-true option if it matches your need.

\$69.99 (SE), \$49.99 (Black), \$59.99 (Other Colors) | xbox.com



2

3 Razer Wolverine V2 Chroma

If you're looking for a little flash in your hands, the latest wired Wolverine from Razer might be the ticket. Customizable RGB lighting provides a modern and sleek look, but the V2 is more than a pretty face. The tactile face buttons feel more like mouse clicks than button presses, leading to faster actuation. Likewise, the customizable thumbsticks are especially snappy, leaping back into place very fast after use.

The L-shaped grips jut out further than the standard controller, which feels especially gratifying if you tend to hold your controller a bit lower on the sides, or your hands are larger. The hair triggers work great, thanks to a straightforward toggle for each. Six additional remappable buttons have exemplary placement – four on the inner back of the pad, and two on the interior side of each bumper.

It's an exceptional controller, but you need to really want the glowing lights, click-y face buttons, and unique shape and button layout, since it's competing in price against the first-party (and wireless) Elite 2.

\$149.99 | [razer.com](https://www.razer.com)



3



4

4 Scuf Instinct Pro

Scuf was an early and successful arrival on the custom controller scene; the company's longtime expertise is on full display with the Instinct Pro – if you're willing to shell out for the experience.

The upfront purchasing process is one of the biggest selling points, allowing you to extensively customize and recolor almost every aspect of the controller, albeit often at an upcharge on top of the already high price. Choose short or long thumbsticks with other concave or domed tops. You can even remove the interior rumble pack to reduce the already very light and comfortable weight.

In hand, the Instinct Pro is a dream, hewing remarkably close to the standard Xbox design but with subtle tweaks that add up to a big difference, including a hex-pattern backgrip that becomes more pronounced as it rises to the edges. The triggers feature an easy on-the-fly toggle between the quick pull and full distance pull. The back-side buttons offer an innovative design; the buttons sit adjacent to each other on the grip (below your ring finger) and body (above your middle finger), making for very easy access, but without the jutting obtrusiveness of paddles. Swappable profiles adjust with the press of a button on the far back. The magnetized battery hatch is slick, but some might take issue with the absence of a rechargeable battery. Still, there's no denying the tremendous customization options or the outstanding performance once you have the Instinct Pro in hand.

\$199.99 | [scufgaming.com](https://www.scufgaming.com)

5 Victrix Gambit Controller

One of the newest arrivals in the controller scene, the Gambit comes out strong with a competitive price and especially impressive credentials on the competitive scene. Victrix boasts a faster input response for the Gambit than even other wired controllers, and there's compelling evidence to prove out that claim. That alone is the selling point for the highest tier of competitive player, though if you're not aiming for the very top of the leaderboards, you may not notice the distinction. And more casual players may find the wired-only connection to be a drag.

The angular design and more heavily textured triggers are a departure from the standard Xbox controller and give it a slightly different hand-feel – well worth trying if something about the boilerplate curve has always bothered you. If you tend toward a tight grip in clutch gunfire exchanges, be aware that the back paddles press easily, which could be a problem for some. Two swappable faceplates are packed in; I'm partial to the smooth purple silicone, but some may prefer the smooth white plastic. Keeping up with the competition, adjustable back paddles, trigger stops, and four interchangeable thumbsticks let you make the controller your own. The included hard case is also a nice bonus.

Victrix has sweetened the deal with a lifetime subscription to Dolby Atmos on your headset when you're using the Gambit in concert, which is a nice bonus on an already impressive new contender in the controller market, especially at this price point. 💎

\$99.99 | [victrixpro.com](https://www.victrixpro.com)



5



NINTENDO SWITCH OLED REVIEW

Playing with portable power

by Alex Stadnik

Nintendo has often iterated on its existing consoles, to varying degrees of success. The Nintendo Switch is already no stranger to new versions, with the Lite and the upgraded battery model releasing over the last four years. The Switch OLED is the latest update, and while those who primarily play docked shouldn't feel the need to purchase the system on day one, handheld players will benefit the most from the shiny new update.

The main draw of the upgrade comes from the system's namesake feature; the OLED screen is a wonder. The color fidelity is crystal clear from the moment you turn on the console. While I enjoyed my time with *Metroid Dread* docked, I was mesmerized in handheld mode because of a crisp color palette that took advantage of the boost in contrast. That visual fidelity isn't limited to Nintendo's most prominent 2021 release. Pixel art games popped off the screen, and Hyrule never looked so good in *The Legend*



of *Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Like the launch Switch, the OLED remains 720p, which may sound disappointing, but was forgotten when I got my hands on the system. I was reminded of the upgrade from Xbox One to the Xbox One X in that I'm still playing the same games, but the extra boost in color fidelity has me excited to return to my current library on the go.

The latest model also comes with a seven-inch display, which is .8 inches larger than the original Switch and 1.5 inches bigger than the Switch Lite. That doesn't sound like a sizable change on paper, but it makes a substantial difference in execution. The OLED is roughly the same size as the launch Switch, but a smaller bezel makes room for the larger screen. That extra real estate is noticeable in games like *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, where I felt like I could cut through the chaos and focus on my character. Combine that with the boost in colors, and Switch games have never looked this good undocked.

KICKING UP THE QUALITY

I also love the OLED's new speakers and kickstand. Instead of the headache-causing plastic strip, the updated kickstand now stretches the length of the console and gives the system better support. I've experienced several plane rides where I tried to play my launch Switch with detached joy-cons, only to put it away because the console either kept falling over or I couldn't get the angle right. Those days are gone as the new, adjustable kickstand can fit any angle while remaining upright and sturdy.

The sound quality is also improved, with new speakers featuring a fuller sound compared to the relatively tin-like audio of the original console. It won't replace my soundbar, but I love playing *Metroid* undocked and having a more enjoyable sound experience.

A COUCH SLOUCH

However, those who like *Smash Bros.* on the big screen don't have much to look forward to. All Switch models run on an NVIDIA Custom Tegra processor, meaning gameplay performance, loading times, and previous limitations carry over to Nintendo's newest hardware. The sense of excitement that buying a new console brings quickly dissipated when I docked the OLED, only to find the same menus and issues that have plagued the system since 2017.

It's not all bad news, though. The new dock comes with essentially the same features as the previous TV connector (minus one USB 2.0 port). However, the built-in LAN port is a great addition. Instead of tracking down an extension like before, I was happy to be able to dock my Switch OLED and download games in half the time. Multiplayer titles also benefited from a wired connection with an overall smoother online experience. It's a welcome addition that Switch players will appreciate even though it's not exactly groundbreaking.

The Switch OLED also comes with 64GB of internal storage, double that of previous models. Combining the new storage space with my 128GB micro SD allowed me to download the bulk of my library while leaving room for upcoming titles. While extra storage space and a LAN port may not be worth the \$350 price point for those already stocked up on dongles and SD cards, these bells and whistles were worth the price as my launch Switch was starting to show its age.



Specs

- Size: 9.5" long, .55" deep, 4" high (with Joy-Cons attached)
- Screen: 1280x720 resolution with a 7 inch OLED screen
- CPU: Nvidia custom Tegra processor
- Storage: 64GB (additional microSD card slot supports additional memory)
- Resolution: 1920x1080 docked, 1280x720 undocked
- Audio output: Supports 5.1ch PCM output
- USB: Type-C
- Battery: Lithium ion battery that lasts between 4.5-9 hours

Everything In The Box

- Nintendo Switch console
- Right and left Joy-Cons
- Joy-Con straps
- High-speed HDMI Cable
- Nintendo Switch Dock (with LAN port)
- Joy-Con Grip
- Nintendo Switch AC Adapter

FINAL GRADE: B

The Nintendo Switch OLED is the best version of the console on the market for undocked players. The screen is an absolute marvel, and its vibrant colors and larger play space rekindled my love for the system. As someone who owns a launch Switch and primarily plays undocked, the myriad of additions justify the investment. While those updates are great for like-minded Nintendo fans, the lack of meaningful processing upgrades or 4K support makes the price a hard sell for those who prefer Princess Peach on the big screen. 💎



THE GAME AWARDS 2021

After more than 80 million livestreams in 2020, this year's show will be jam-packed with more World Premiere reveals than ever before

interview by Andrew Reiner

Last year's The Game Awards show was the biggest yet in terms of viewership. Growing more than 84 percent year-over-year to the tune of a staggering 83 million livestream views, The Game Awards has become one of the video game industry's biggest events. But we aren't just tuning in to find out which title will be crowned Game of the Year; we are also there for the World Premieres, which shine the spotlight on new games we'll be playing in the years ahead. Some publishers save their biggest surprises for The Game Awards, a show that almost didn't exist.

For a decade, Keighley was the producer and host of Spike TV's Video Game Awards, a show that started strong in the early 2000s, but fizzled out in 2013 due to poor viewership numbers and criticism over the show's format. For the 2014 show, Spike wasn't going to broadcast it on TV, opting instead to stream it online. Keighley didn't agree with Spike's direction, and dropped out of the presentation. For unknown reasons on top of Keighley's departure, Spike canceled that year's event in the eleventh hour. That didn't stop Keighley from having an awards show that year.

He worked with publishers to fund a new show simply titled The Game Awards. Given the diminishing returns of Spike's show, he didn't know if this new program would draw people in. That year's livestream netted nearly 2 million views – a respectable number – but the true victory was the format and tone of the show. This was the format people were clearly looking for. In each following year, The Game Awards' viewership has doubled and is now one of the highest viewed programs of any entertainment medium.

In early October, I caught up with Keighley as he was finalizing plans for this year's show. He once again serves the dual duties of producer and host. He has always been open about the ups and downs of The Game Awards, and always seems relaxed, no matter how close the show is to airing. This year, he tells me he has too many World Premiere reveals and feels terrible turning publishers down. For the first time, he doesn't have a clear idea of what the Game of the Year nominees will be. He can usually predict a few of them, but this year he has no idea which games will net those honors.



Sean Murray accepts accolades for No Man's Sky, which won Best Ongoing Game last year

The Game Awards grew from 45 million viewers to an unfathomable 80 million in one year. Given we were sheltering in place during the COVID-19 pandemic, can you speak to how the growth was potentially tied to that?

I'm still amazed we were able to do the show last year. That happened right when the second lockdown was just starting. We were in Los Angeles, and in the days leading into the show, we were unsure what was going to happen. We had a satellite truck parked outside my house just in case I would have to broadcast the show from home. We had this set we were building every day and were worried [the show] would get canceled if the government was going to shut down the city. [The pandemic] was getting increasingly worse, almost every day as we led up to the show. I didn't believe the show was happening until the day before. I was like, "I guess we're really going to get a chance to do it."

It was really challenging to pull it together and do things over Zoom and figure out how to do it safely with our team with all the testing and everything around it. The victory was just getting to do the show. I was kind of depressed for months thinking that we weren't

going to be able to do it. The fact that it actually did so well was incredible. Seeing it grow was really heartwarming.

There are always two sides to the coin, though. Success on one, and on the other, the pressure for this year. Can we keep growing? We never think about the audience numbers. We don't sit around and plot a strategy to get another 10 million viewers. We just focus on making an awesome show for the community.

For safety concerns, the pandemic continues to throw kinks into live events. At this point in time, you are planning on returning to an in-person format with an audience. Does it feel like business as usual, or are you planning on having that satellite truck in waiting again?

The big difference this year is we have vaccines. We had a year of learning the process around how to do these things. We decided pretty early that we're going to go back to the Microsoft Theater, and we're going to build our set and have our orchestra there. There are a lot of protocols and costs about, like, doing a show like this, and the testing and everything involved in doing it. We're planning to do a full-scale show at the theater. This will be our biggest set yet. It's our

biggest production. We're going full tilt with the full experience, but keeping safety in mind. We do have contingency plans if there is another variant or issues pop up. How can we pivot and sort of do something different?

We're doing a traditional show with some capacity restrictions on the audience and some other requirements. We have to see if people are comfortable traveling,

including internationally. We are unsure about that. That's everyone's personal decision. I'm excited to be back in a venue. Most of the game companies, when we talk to them this year, they all like the idea of finally being able to get back to doing something in person. I'm honored that we're sort of the first event that's going to do something with people gathering in a safe and controlled way.





Nolan North presents the award for Best Multiplayer in 2020

Given last year's success, I have a feeling every publisher and developer is jumping at the chance to be a part of the show.

Generally, people are really positive on wanting to be a part of the show. And I see some of that is physical presence, but a lot want to contribute content. One of the greatest things last year, was in the middle of a pandemic, all these developers were able to make awesome trailers and give us content to put in the show. In terms of things to be announced at the show, we have more games this year than ever before. We're in a nice position that people want to be a part of the show. And you know, it's an award show, but increasingly, I think more we want to use it as a vehicle to kind of share news on games. So that's this sort of internal balance that we're striking.

The other thing that is in the background is there's a lot of these streaming shows and movies based on games. We're trying to figure out how to navigate some of that, like *The Witcher* and the *Cuphead* shows, as well as the *Uncharted* movie. This is the first year we're trying to navigate how to include some of that stuff. They are based on games, but not actually games.

You said you have more reveals than ever. What can we expect from them?

As always, we try and balance things between brand-new games to updates on games that people really care about. There are also live-service games that could

have content dropping the night of the show. This year, we have a lot of stuff being announced for the first time at the show, which is exciting. I feel like next generation has started but it hasn't really in a way. And I don't mean that to disparage any existing games, but there's [new stuff] coming down the pipe from first- and third-parties. The install bases of the current consoles have limited how much stuff is coming out. I believe 2022 is when the jets really get turned on. We'll have a couple things in our show that I think are going to be truly next-gen. Experiences that I think will excite people about the future and where games go. And I'm not just saying just first-party games. There are technical showpieces that I'm excited about. And then we also have a balance between big franchises with small developers, and smaller teams are doing really interesting things. It's a constantly moving target. I've said this before, but some things drop out the week before the show, and there are also new things that show up on my doorstep a week before the show.

I always tell the story of *In the Valley of the Gods* from Campo Santo, the studio with Valve now. They came to me two weeks before the show. I'm like, "This is amazing. Where was this trailer three months ago?" People think [the show] is all plotted out well in advance. Sometimes it is, but oftentimes things are just shifting. I feel pretty confident that we have a really good lineup that's going to excite people. I've also learned that you have to manage expectations because everyone has a different game in their mind's eye.

I think next year is going to be really exciting for games overall. There's so much content coming out.

Figuring out where the reveals go has to be a big jigsaw puzzle. Have you figured out what the first and last reveal will be? They always seem to be two of the big ones.

Good question. I think I sort of know the last thing, which is going to be really cool. And the first thing, I think I know, but it might shift around a little bit. The positioning of things in the show is always interesting. Some companies are very specific about where they want to be in the show. I honestly do not make those calls until probably about a month before the show when we really see everything that comes in. The minute I say yes to something,



The 2020 show had to make many accommodations for the ongoing pandemic; Innersloth celebrates *Among Us* winning Best Multiplayer Game from a remote location

something else might show up. We keep it fluid. We definitely have a good sense of the stuff that's early and late in the show. And then there's a bunch of cool stuff in the middle of it as well. We want to surprise people with stuff they aren't expecting.

Any new awards this year?

We don't have any new awards. The accessibility award will be back this year. We've been toying with a couple categories that I think we'll add in the future. We're not quite there yet, though. I think eventually we might do an award for best adaptation with all these streaming shows, movies, comic books, and other things coming out. I think there's something interesting there. There's just not enough yet. I think in the next couple of years, that'll be something. And we're also thinking a little bit about user-generated content being made in games like Fortnite, Core, and Roblox. Again, I don't think we're quite there yet, but that's one that I think is on the radar for the future. This year, it's pretty much the same.

You mentioned you're building the biggest set yet. I can't even wrap my brain around what it could be. You already have giant statues on it, one of the biggest screens out there, and a complete orchestra. What is the space for?

We just keep adding more every year. We have a really cool video floor that we're doing that's kind of a video screen. It's really interesting. We haven't revealed

some of the musical guests, but we've got amazing, huge names doing that. Every year I think we're slowly building this show into what I hope is the biggest award show in entertainment, which just happens to be about games. We're cautious this year obviously because of COVID, but that has not stopped us. I think you'll see it's definitely our most ambitious set. We're upping the scale and scope. It's a little bit of a dangerous game to play, but yeah, we want to keep building, create more of a spectacle.

How limited will capacity be?

It will number in the thousands, but it's not going to be a full house. We're just trying to control the numbers a little bit.

You highlighted something a lot of people are feeling about PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X: a lack of games that are built just for those machines. What are your thoughts on next-gen gaming so far?

I mentioned earlier that I think next-gen has started, but we haven't really seen a ton of showcases, right? I would say Forza Horizon 5 is really spectacular. Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart is a cool showcase, and I love the DualSense – that controller just gives people so much opportunity to think of where games are going to go. We haven't seen a lot of new next-gen IP yet. Returnal is probably the best example of that so far.

These systems are so powerful, and there's so much opportunity there, but this has been a difficult year for developers to make these games while working from home. A lot of stuff has been delayed. I have games that we were going to announce last year at The Game Awards, and we're probably going to announce this year. They were delayed at least a full year. Some people lost a year or two in development. There are a lot of delays that have affected next-gen and that pipeline of content. It was still a good year, but I think next year and beyond are going to be exciting. The thing that I think has

happened with a lot of these next-gen boxes is people buy them yet play their old games on them. They look better, right? It's a better quality of life. The attach rate with these new systems has not been great, partially because of the Game Pass thing, but also to play Warzone or Fortnite or stuff they already have. Even though people are buying the systems, they don't have those true next-gen showcase titles to play. They are coming. Those are the ones that have been delayed. Performance capture is really hard to do in the middle of COVID. All of these story games that we love take a lot of time to make.

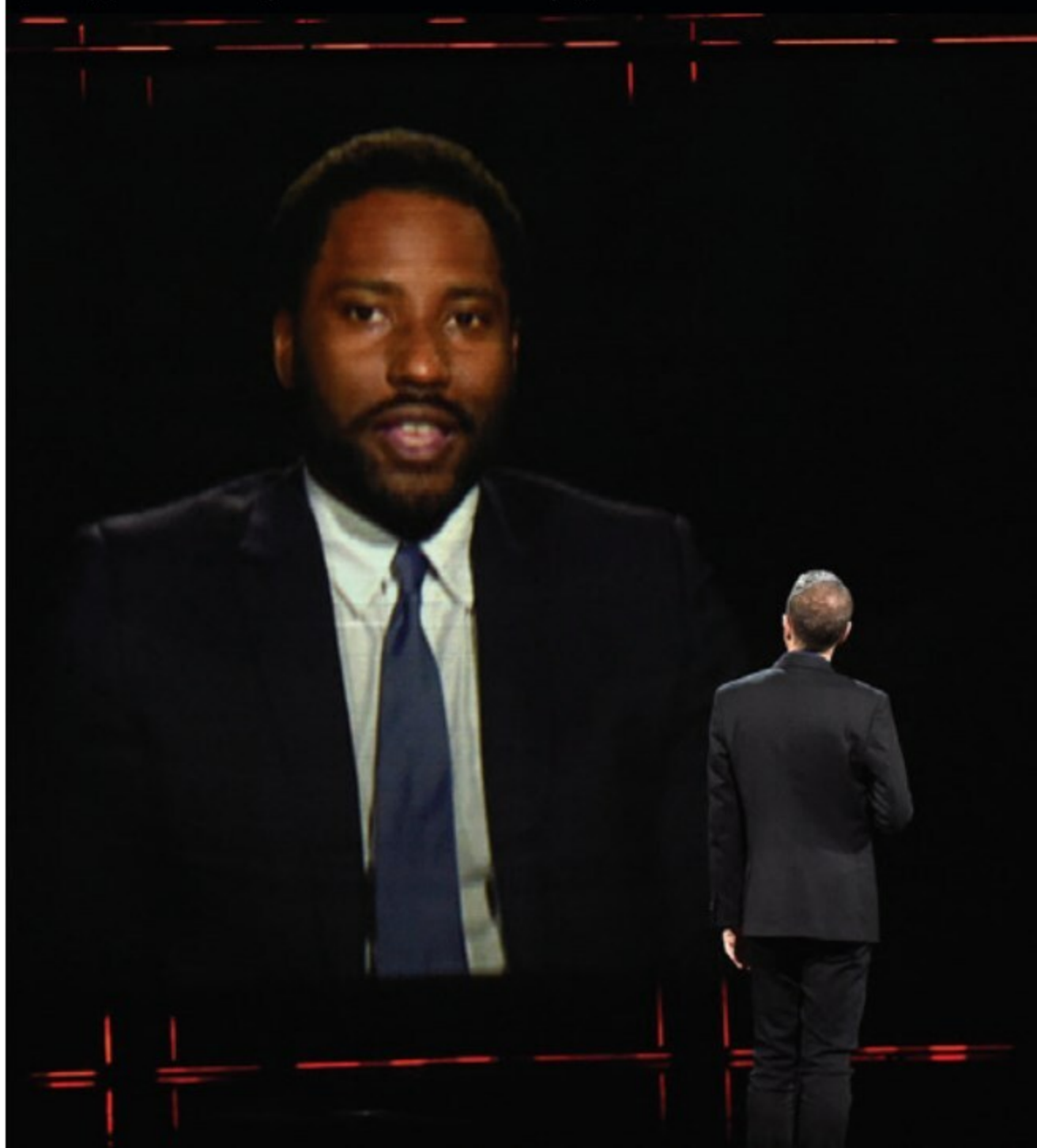
Of any game that hasn't been announced, what is one game franchise that you want to see come back? What would you love to have as a World Premiere?

I would love to see BioShock come back. I've missed that franchise a lot. Infinite, I still think of. I miss that franchise. An awesome new BioShock would be hype. I'm also a Valve fan, so anything Valve-related would be fun to see. One of the best games I played in the past year was Crash Bandicoot 4. That was an awesome game. I wouldn't mind seeing some of those classic franchises come back in a new way, like a new Jak & Daxter. 💎

The Game Awards will be held on December 9, live from Los Angeles' Microsoft theater. It will broadcast around the world and can be viewed from various streaming services like YouTube and Twitch.

Geoff Keighley has been the host and executive producer for The Game Awards since its inception in 2014

Recent years have seen increased involvement from Hollywood talent. John David Washington (Tenet) presented last year's Best Narrative category





EVERYTHING OLD



» **PLATFORM**

Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» **STYLE**

1-Player Shooter
(24-Player Online)

» **PUBLISHER**

Xbox Game Studios

» **DEVELOPER**

343 Industries

» **RELEASE**

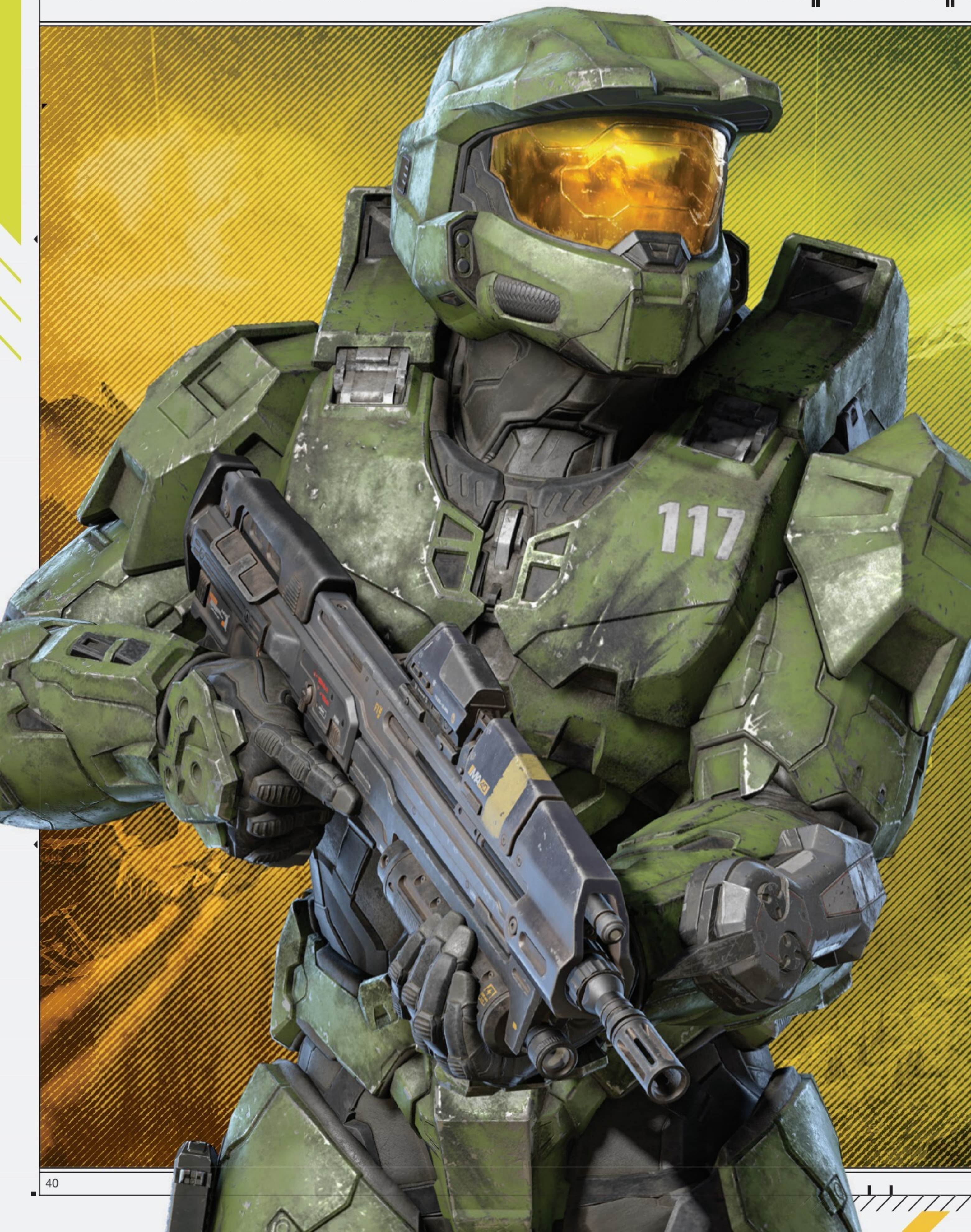
December 8

IS NEW AGAIN

20 years after the launch
of Halo: Combat Evolved,
Halo Infinite goes back to
its roots

.....

BY MATT MILLER





HALO INFINITE HAS TAKEN A LONG ROAD TO LAUNCH.

And while that development story began in the wake of Halo 5's debut in 2015, its true inspirations arise far further back in time, with the release of Halo: Combat Evolved in 2001. That first game established a grand sci-fi aesthetic inspired by classic speculative fiction from the likes of Larry Niven and Robert A. Heinlein. Combat Evolved revolved around a small cast of characters, explicitly focused on the interactions between a nigh-unstoppable super soldier and his blue-tinged A.I. companion. That first game presented a conflict about overwhelming odds, in which the hero single-handedly faced a literal army of fierce aliens after crashlanding on a mysterious ringworld. It also made waves with its inclusive and engaging multiplayer, which invited twitch shooters and strategic objective players to find common ground. And perhaps of greatest importance to the medium's history, Halo: Combat Evolved became the standard-bearer for Microsoft's fledgling gaming business, setting the stage for two decades of expansion.

One impression is unmistakable after hours of seeing Halo Infinite's massive campaign, many tense matches in its multiplayer, and hours more interviewing the development team at 343 Industries. This is a game chiefly inspired by and rooted in the specific success story of Halo: Combat Evolved. Even as Infinite continues directly onward from the cliffhanger players have waited to resolve since 2015, Infinite has grander ambitions: to relaunch the Halo series in 2021 and rediscover what made that first game so magical all those years ago.

COMMON THREADS

"The team definitely talked about it being a spiritual successor to the first Halo game, *Combat Evolved*," says head of creative Joseph Staten. "And I really think it is. If you play the game, whether it's the art style, or the characters in the sandbox, or a more tightly woven and intimate story against this epic backdrop. All those things feel very early, early Halo. And yet, it feels very modern, too. It's a simpler art style, but it is so much richer in terms of the visual presentation and what we're able to show in terms of breadth of the environment."

Staten finds himself in an unusual position in the story of Halo Infinite's development. As an employee at Bungie years ago, he was intimately involved in creating the early games in the franchise. Years later, in 2020, he stepped into a leadership role at 343 Industries, well after much of the formative development for Halo Infinite had been completed. In conversation, he's deferential to the team he leads, consistently pointing to their work ahead of his direct involvement as key to the game's breadth and vision. "First and foremost, I'm helping a great team execute on their vision for a game," Staten says. "Helping make sure that there's clarity around what we're trying to do, making sure the team has lots of energy, and that we're all heading in the same direction."

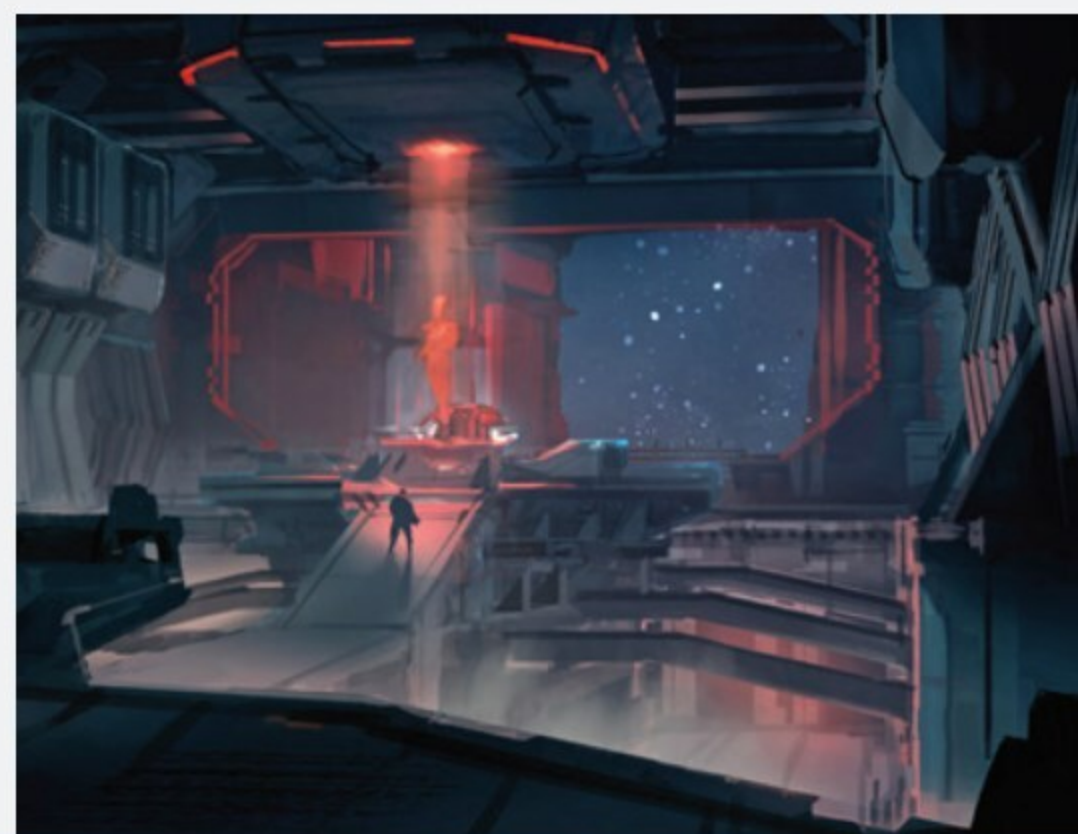
However, it's also clear that Staten is

helping lead the creative disciplines at 343 toward a longer-term goal for Halo Infinite. "There was also a goal to bring someone in who could help plan for the future of Halo, and understand that we're now working as a live game, that we're an evolving service, and we have this great community," Staten says. "And then dig in and help chart the course for what's coming next. That part of my job has been more challenging to do in the last year, as we've all been so focused on launching the first release of Infinite. It's more than just a game. It's a universe that's going to continue to grow over time, in collaboration with our fans, and really fueled by Xbox Game Pass."

It's the turn of phrase about the "first release of Infinite" that catches my attention, as Staten discusses Halo Infinite in the framework of a dedicated platform, not just a single game and launch. It's clear after talking with him that Infinite is viewed at 343 (and by extension, at Microsoft) as a long-term investment – a sort of series in its own right within the broader Halo franchise, with multiple content pieces and installments all its own.

As I watch the early hours of Halo Infinite's campaign unfold, it's not hard to imagine how the game could expand beyond the scope of a single release. Like in the first Halo game, Master Chief once again finds himself marooned on a Halo ring – one larger than any he's visited before. Whereas that first Halo created

an illusion of freeform exploration across a massive alien installation, Infinite makes good on that promise. "In many ways, it's the fulfillment of this vision we had for Halo 20 years ago," Staten says. "I can remember joining Bungie in 1998 and walking into the Halo room – I was on the Myth 2 team at the time – but I remember going into that room and looking at the build. It was this mesh terrain and this Skybox of the ring in the background. And I remember asking, 'Can you go to the other side of the ring?' I remember people at the time saying, like, 'Are you nuts?'" It remains to be seen if Halo Infinite will completely answer the question of a fully explorable Halo. Still, after several hours of exploration, it's clear that it's a far more convincing answer to that desire than we've ever had.



KILL YOUR DARLINGS

343 Industries took the reins of Halo in 2007 and wasted little time embracing both the past of the series and charting a new course for its future. 2011's Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary – and later 2014's Halo: The Master Chief Collection – made it clear that the studio wasn't abandoning the beloved games that established the franchise. At the same time, Halo 4 and Halo 5: Guardians moved the series in a very different direction. Unafraid to take risks in the name of growth and innovation, 343 introduced a whole new family of enemy combatants called the Prometheans. Across the two games, multiplayer moved in many new directions, from the cooperative Spartan Ops to the massive Warzones of Halo 5. A sizeable new cast of characters claimed a portion of the limelight, from the captain and crew of the new *UNSC Infinity* to new Spartans like Jameson Locke. And established character plotlines moved in surprising directions, including the apparent villainizing of Cortana.

Not everyone was a fan. While Halo 4 and 5 achieved commercial and critical success, many longtime players felt the series drifting away from its core identity. And some of those players were on the team at 343 Industries. "I think 343 made some mistakes in chasing dragons; they forgot that they owned their own dragon," says head of design Jerry Hook. "Creating or designing for an established franchise versus a brand-new IP is very different. We tried to put a lot of those foundational elements into very clear documents. Why do the weapons do what they do? Why do we go to a different form of aim-down-sights than the rest of the industry? Why does



Halo do that, and why was it successful? It really helped us get back to what made Halo the dragon that it was."

The first few minutes of Halo Infinite are a very public way of clearing the figurative stage, and getting back to basics. The *UNSC Infinity* is on fire as enemy ships ram it into oblivion. Most of the heroic humans of the last few games are absent, presumably either dead or lost in the conflagration. The attacking aliens look like the Covenant of games past, but with a new name and identity – the Banished – while the Prometheans are nowhere to be seen, nor will they be. "We're not saying that stuff never happened; it's still clearly part of the universe," says character director Stephen Dyck. "There are mysteries to uncover; it's just not going to hit you in the face about 'if

you haven't read this book or you haven't played this game – you're in trouble! You better catch up.' I think that was a big part of why we streamlined. Here are these relatable forces that can be part of the Banished. The Prometheans being in that group wouldn't make as much sense."

In the cinematic opening of the game aboard the *Infinite*, the Banished leader, Atriox, trounces Master Chief in a brutal one-on-one melee, flinging him out into space as the *Infinite* comes apart, leaving our green-armored super-soldier for dead. At no point in those early minutes is there any mention of Cortana's seeming takeover of the galaxy that so galvanized fans at the end of Halo 5. The whole sequence is shocking in its implications and leaves the viewer reeling for answers.





Of course, that's the point. The *in media res* opening of Halo Infinite is far from what it first appears. As the narrative unfolds in the subsequent hours, it's apparent that Master Chief and his latest mission is very much about confronting the profound implications of Cortana's betrayal and finding a way to stop her. "The interesting thing is it's about 18 months after the end of Halo 5," says associate creative director Paul Crocker. "To people who remember Halo 5, it ended with a bunch of characters in a tent, discussing what they were going to do next. And one of the things we really wanted to do was not start the next game and have 10 people going, 'Here's a plan on a map.' And we also wanted to move time forward so that there were surprises for people because we knew that we wanted to introduce a solution to the problem of Cortana."

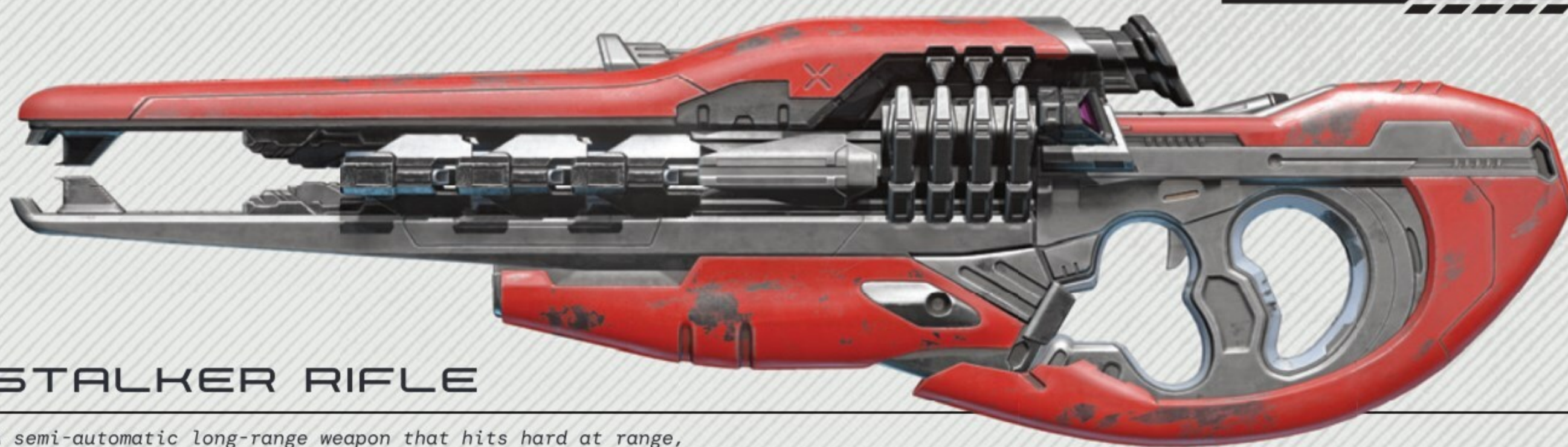


The complete picture emerges slowly and encompasses two significant mysteries. The first is revealing the untold events that led to *Infinity's* destruction and its presence alongside a Banished armada above the Zeta Halo. The second is about the six-month time gap as Master Chief floats inactive in space after his defeat at the hands of Atriox.

Together, those lingering unanswered questions are the heart of Halo Infinite's story, lending a cryptic air to the adventure. It's a way for the developers to craft a genuine mystery, where both the player

and main character are playing catch-up, trying to understand what has happened. "We're a mystery story about what is going on, and unpicking it as you play through the game," Crocker says. "That's always been the goal for us. When I started here, the most important phrase that was being used was 'green man and blue lady,' and how they mattered to people, and really just trying to get us back to that and what made Halo Halo over the last 20 years. So that involves making a story that didn't need to have a huge 'previously on' at the beginning."





STALKER RIFLE

A semi-automatic long-range weapon that hits hard at range, but overheats and requires venting after only a few shots

BACK TO BASICS

After months floating in space as his armor keeps him alive, Master Chief Petty Officer John-117 is found by a surviving Pelican pilot who has been eking out survival after the *Infinity*'s destruction. Discovering the famed Spartan, the pilot is overjoyed by the thought that he might be able to return to his family, but John quickly dashes those ideas as he's ready to get back to the fight. As John's armor gradually comes back online, the pilot has him look up and down at a light to calibrate view controls – the first of many simple moments that recall specific beats from Halo: Combat Evolved.

Retrieving a pistol with a single bullet, John wastes no time ejecting back into

the debris-strewn space to infiltrate a nearby Banished ship, bouncing and tumbling between space debris. Over comms, the pilot continually emphasizes the impossible odds and hopelessness of the situation, but Master Chief isn't having it. From these first moments, John reasserts the thematic mantle he's worn since the series began – uncompromising resilience and hope in the face of the insurmountable. As he sets foot onto the *Warship Gbraakon*, the heads-up display pops into view, and the action is on.

I'm immediately struck by the pacing of the action, and its similarity to early Halo games. As we move through the enemy ship, there's an ebb and flow of intensity, starting with moments of power fantasy in

which Chief sweeps over hapless Grunt soldiers and their often comedic dialogue and punctuating with big, explosive fights against aggressive Brutes and shielded Jackals. New weapons are scattered everywhere through the environment, encouraging constant scavenging, changing up between longer distance fire exchanges with carbines and grenades, and short-range skirmishes of pistols and punches.

WHO ARE THE BANISHED?

Earlier seen as the chief antagonists of Halo Wars 2, the Banished are a brutal and militaristic splinter faction made up of species formerly part of the Covenant. Led by a powerful brute named Atriox, his fate remains unknown after the destruction of the *Infinity*. His warchief, Escharum, seems to lead the forces on the Zeta Halo.





The ammo economy has seen an overhaul, targeted at several distinct types of damage while ensuring that players can hold onto individual weapons they like, since multiple weapons share a type. Kinetic, plasma, shock, hardlight, and power ammo each fuel different weapons in the game world, and have unique properties. For instance, weapons that use the new shock ammo can stun opponents and sometimes even chain to nearby foes. While you can always pick up new weapons as they drop in your path, the strategic placement of ammo crates for particular ammo types lets you bring a gun back to capacity before an extensive engagement. But more than individual weapons or crates, the grunt mule is my favorite

new addition to the scavenging gameplay. Like a treasure goblin in a fantasy RPG, this frantic little alien runs through battlefields at high speed as he hauls a variety of valuable weapons. Take him out, and his inventory blossoms across the ground – a smorgasbord of tasty weaponry to enrich the sandbox of play.

Wandering through the *Gbraakon*, the other notable gameplay change is the grappleshot. First introduced publicly some time ago, it might have been tempting to dismiss it as just another tool in Master Chief's belt. Even in the first few minutes of play, that impression is proven false. The grappleshot is a powerful and fundamental shift in gameplay, at least for players who have the wisdom to leverage

its potential. Activated with a tap of RB on the controller, and governed against overuse by a timer, the grappleshot lets you instantaneously dash to distant raised ledges and clamber up onto them. But it's more than that. Grab weapons from the ground 20 feet away. Ping a Jackal's shield and make him stumble back. Board and overtake vehicles. Pull enemies to your location for a quick melee takedown.

In practice, it changes the battlefield in compelling ways, altering the way that the developers have been able to design a level. In one especially thrilling battle, Master Chief reaches the bridge of the warship, and prepares to scuttle it by sabotaging the pipes cooling the engine. The bridge is a massive and multitiered combat space, with raised platforms at various heights, all of which swarm with Banished. The grappleshot allows for regular repositioning across the room, with occasional pauses in traversal to use it in battle. One potent option the weapon grants in this fight is grabbing fusion coils in the environment, which can then be flung back out into a crowd to cause explosive devastation. Later, as the ship comes apart at the seams, John leaps and grapples to catapult between hanging crates in a cavernous cargo hold, even as the containers are crashing together and tumbling out into space. Across the game, spaces are larger and far more vertical, but still allow for easy traversal and exploration.

THE WEAPONS OF HALO INFINITE



DISRUPTOR

This rapidfire pistol blasts out shock damage that can disable vehicles or stun opponents



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: HALO TURNS 20
.....



BONNIE ROSS

STUDIO HEAD

.....

I don't know if you can separate Halo from Xbox or Xbox from Halo; their joint origin meant that their respective success depended on each other. Xbox is iconic because with it, Microsoft launched a platform that sought to expand gaming's traditional boundaries. Halo is iconic because it defined what that expansion could look like; for example, at that time, first-person shooters were largely made for PC gaming. Xbox and Halo together pioneered what the genre looked and felt like on a console, and what it meant to make an epic sci-fi world - and being the hero that we wanted to be - while making it more accessible to experience. Another example: people were already making memories, playing games together locally via couch co-op/competitive and LAN parties, but Halo and Xbox together took that experience and scaled it from local to global. Together, Halo and Xbox paved the way for how we play together today; connecting us to a community of people around the world. We're still feeling these ripples today. For many of us, since March 2020, being able to remotely connect to a global gaming community like this meant that we could stay in touch with friends, family and the world during quarantine.





HEATWAVE

A Forerunner hardlight weapon with bolts of energy that can ricochet off hard surfaces

THE WEAPON

After the Banished ship is destroyed, Master Chief once again finds himself floating free in outer space, and we get our first clear view of the Zeta Halo, including its shattered sections along one long stretch of the curve. As John's systems reinitialize, and his pilot friend aboard the Pelican picks him back up, we see a sequence of encrypted messages pop into his visor.

The most important of these demands: "Retrieve Weapon." The suggestion seems to be that Master Chief is always searching for a weapon to continue the fight and needs to find another gun; however, this particular retrieval is a bit more involved than that, and introduces the most important new character of Halo Infinite.

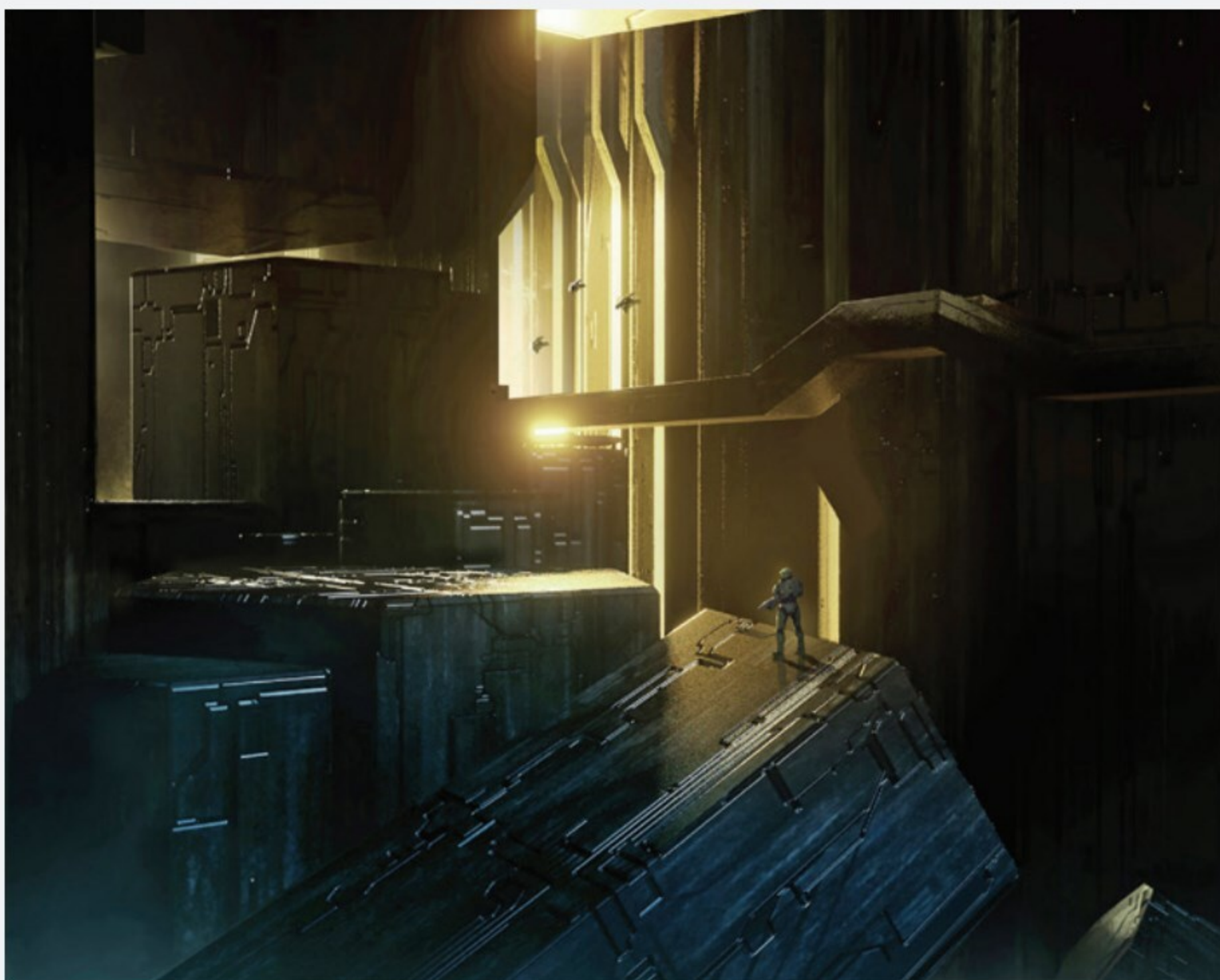
Tracing the source of a decrypted message he can't read, John descends aboard the Pelican to the broken section of Zeta's interior, where he promptly jumps out and begins to fight through Banished forces that have already infested the ring. In this "Foundation" level, the first thing that catches my eye is the towering Forerunner architecture, which is dimly lit and looming like a cathedral, much more reminiscent of the earliest Combat Evolved

structures than the buildings we saw in Halo 4 and 5.

"I was asked to help define what the new Forerunner style is going to look like for this game; the words that were given to me were 'classic' and 'legacy,'" says senior environment artist Tim Diaz. "We played all the original Halo games, just to figure out how when Bungie was doing this, what was in their mind? Why would they pick these kinds of angles? They had a directionality of always making the player look up. We had directionality in Halo 4 and 5, but it was more of pointing the player to the objective, rather than just letting the player look at the environment. So, let's rebuild on those principles and make this more of a spectacle; bring it back to that church-like monolithic style."



The Pelican pilot plays a pivotal role in the story, often as a foil to Master Chief's heroics



While the spaces are vast, the subsequent, mostly linear level through the bowels of the Halo is reminiscent of earlier Halo games. The many ramps, pillars, and walls of the familiar Forerunner metal building style just happen to also make for rich strategic battlefields, with lots of cover, raised and lowered platforms, and interconnected walkways. “This is true for many games, but it’s especially true in Halo games, that geometry is gameplay,” Staten says. “The geometry that you make is the foundation of the gameplay – small, tight corridors, big sprawling exterior environments, encounters with lots of paths in chokepoints that funnel you in – geometry plays such a fundamental part in the experience of the game.” The novel level shape is enhanced by the partial destruction of the surrounding ring, as Zeta and its various automatons work to repair what is broken, so entire sections of metal are regularly floating by as if by magic.

Back in the depths of the Zeta Halo, Master Chief fights his way through and zeroes in on the communication signal to find The Weapon. The blue-tinged A.I. that pops to life on a raised Forerunner pedestal looks like Cortana, and sounds like Cortana (voiced by Jen Taylor), but The Weapon is definitely not Cortana. The Weapon was built as a trap to capture and contain Cortana, so that Master Chief could take her back to *Infinity* for deletion. The Weapon should have self-deleted when that happened, but it didn’t. Several of the core mysteries of Halo Infinite begin to come into focus; What actually

happened to Cortana? Why did The Weapon not delete herself? And how exactly was this plan to take out Cortana supposed to work? The answers aren’t forthcoming in these first moments of meeting up with the new starring A.I. companion. Master Chief uploads The Weapon onto his onboard armor chip, and in a largely symbolic action, the player is prompted to press X to “Insert Chip.” The merging of the two is laden with

portent and dramatic music, as if something critical has just happened.

From this point forward, The Weapon emerges as the second central character of Halo Infinite, taking on a role analogous to Cortana’s purpose in the original *Combat Evolved*. Through a combination of clever writing, subtle character animation work, and Taylor’s vocal talents, The Weapon feels unique from her predecessor. She sways and hops like a young girl. She is regularly taken aback and amazed by the wonder of the Halo. She sometimes cracks jokes about the absurdity of their situation, perhaps giving voice to a player’s inner amusement about a circumstance. That innocent and childlike naivety adds an occasional touch of levity to the drama and relays one other important distinction from Cortana. “It’s really important to know that she’s not omniscient, like Cortana was,” says narrative experience director Dan Chosich, alluding to Cortana’s repeated understanding of information beyond the player’s knowledge in previous games. “There’s no secret here; The Weapon doesn’t know what she doesn’t know, and so, as you’re going through the story, she’s learning just as much as you are.”

As the ring reacts to The Weapon’s removal and begins to raise the platform they’re standing on, the Chief hears a whispered voice that sounds like Cortana. When he remarks upon the voice to The Weapon, she responds cryptically: “No. It’s not her. Just dust and echoes.” It’s a phrase that shakes up Master Chief, just as it will longtime Halo players. The mystery of Cortana’s fate is very much still up in the air.

THE WEAPONS OF HALO INFINITE



MANGLER

A hard-hitting kinetic spikethrower perfect for knocking back your opponents as you close distance



OPENING UP

If desired, Halo Infinite may be played along a roughly linear golden path. Like most prior Halo releases, objective markers indicate the next stage of the story, weaving a tightly paced narrative filled with a bevy of set-piece battles. In conversations with the team at 343, expectations are that at least some players will opt for that approach, especially on an initial playthrough.

But unlike most prior Halo games, Infinite is built with the full expectation that a greater percentage of players will be curious to go off the beaten path to explore, upgrade, and discover the nooks and crannies of a more complicated story. As Master Chief ascends toward the surface

of the ring, the first hints of that optional content begin to appear.

After more Banished fling themselves into John's path, he eventually comes across the sad sight of a dead Spartan. Recon specialist Bonita Stone was investigating these underground facilities when a Banished energy sword took her out. She's past saving, but she carries an enhanced shield core, which increases the amount of sustained fire Master Chief can absorb. These KIA Spartans are found along the golden path of the adventure, so you won't miss them, and each provides major new equipment (alongside the grappleshot) that can change your playstyle.

A bit later, Master Chief finds his first



equipment point and the Spartan Core within – a discoverable item that allows for gradual upgrades to his equipment. Unlike the equipment itself, these upgrades aren't necessarily along the main story path. Upgrades offer choices. Do you want your grappleshot to gain a voltaic shock that stuns enemies when they're struck, or is a higher shield capacity more valuable?

Later still, another Spartan's lost armor provides a Threat Sensor – a deployable device that highlights enemies within its range. It can be attached to enemies, allies, vehicles – almost anything – and is convenient against cloaked Elites. Like other equipment, it can be upgraded as well, allowing for multiple sensors to be

deployed at once, offering the type of situational awareness that seems like it might be a gamechanger on Legendary difficulty.

Master Chief finally reaches the elevator to the surface with enhanced shields in place, but it's not an unguarded route. Descending from the elevator, Tremonius is the first of what we're told is many named boss enemies, each offering a convincing threat. Tremonius is a shielded Brute warrior who leaps across the battlefield with the aid of a powered jetpack. He hits hard and is full of bluster, but it's clear he's the introduction to a type of fight that will dramatically ratchet up in intensity. After Master Chief takes him out, the path to the surface is clear.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: HALO TURNS 20



FRANK O'CONNOR

FRANCHISE CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Halo is 20 years old now – and our world, characters, story and universe have evolved a lot. When Halo Combat Evolved arrived, Master Chief's laconic wit, heroic drive and powerful blend of biology and technology – Cortana's near limitless capacity for insight and strategy and the surrounding cast of characters were an instant hit on Xbox.

Halo Infinite's story deals with Chief's legacy – and the legacy of the folks he's lost along the way. It'll still be big, sci-fi spectacle, but there's also going to be a lot of heart. Some of that's going to be information to help you get through the challenges and mysteries ahead, but it's also going to give players characters to care about, and concepts to consider when they've finished.

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS

I recall the sense of awe and excitement as I stepped out of that first crashed Pelican back in 2001, and rotated the analog stick up to see the gentle curve of the Halo ring above me. I remember the odd juxtaposition of the idyllic natural setting, clearly inspired by the forests of the Pacific Northwest, set against the flashing energy weapons of the alien Covenant.

Halo Infinite aims for a similar sense of wonder. As John and The Weapon emerge from the Banished elevator, the bloom of bright light momentarily blinds players to the landscape ahead before clarifying into an inviting and mysterious landscape. The Banished outpost is filled with enemies, but the ring curves away in the distance, rising into the clouds. Conifer trees and craggy mountains beckon, teasing the potential of using the grappleshot to open up new paths to vertical climbing.

If the underground sections of Halo Infinite are like dungeons, the ample open region exteriors feel much more like explorable biomes. Individual regions of the ring are primarily self-contained, even if they might eventually connect to other regions, so 343 has resisted the term open-world. Nonetheless, as Master Chief ranges out across hills and forests of the Zeta Halo, several open-world dynamics indeed come into play.

Open the topographical map, and each area is clearly labeled with a numerical list of discoverables. Those might be Spartan Cores, or the hard-to-find gameplay-



altering hidden skulls. Many audio logs are scattered across the ring, each helping to tell different parts of the narrative, including the fate of Captain Lasky and some of the other characters from the *Infinity*. Have you unlocked fast travel in the area? Is ordnance available to call down in the area? The map offers a quick glimpse of how completely you've scoured a location.

Multiple forward operating bases, or FOBs, are the likely starting point for any

explorations in a given area. Conquer the enemies in these locations, and nearby waypoints open up on the map. Moreover, the FOB gains a terminal from which you can call in Marine survivors, weapons, and even vehicles, which you can take with you as you range out to discover those new waypoints.

Many of those locations and activities award valor. This currency acts as a way to measure your aid to the surviving UNSC





HYDRA

A UNSC weapon that fires semi-guided high-velocity explosives, perfect for taking out closely packed enemies

forces on Zeta ring, who have been trying to survive during Master Chief's six months floating in space. For instance, you might encounter a Banished Propaganda Tower, and destroy it to increase your valor. A few hundred meters away, you can rescue Cayman Squad from their Banished captors to gain more valor. In turn, valor lets you summon more powerful marine units, weapons, and vehicles back at the FOB, creating a tidy loop of engagement.

I especially liked the high-value target (HVT) missions. These waypoints let Master Chief hunt down a named miniboss and its minions, along with the unique weapon that the big foe used against you.

Fully clear out the nest, and the unique weapon becomes summonable back at the FOB. You might get a duelist's energy sword, which hits harder than normal, or a Needler with better homing. Completing each HVT adds a new variation of a standard weapon to your arsenal.

Most areas also have larger bases to tackle, sometimes as part of the main story. Master Chief assaults a colossal Banished prison in one of them, surrounded by walls, populated by dozens of enemies, and featuring multiple exterior and interior spaces, all overseen by an Elite sword-wielding boss who has been torturing UNSC personnel. The idea here

is to use the many options from your FOB, alongside your upgraded equipment, to take a unique path into a big freeform fight. Kit out a whole squad of Marines and bust through the gate with a warthog. Or use your grappleshot to slip over the walls and attack from within. Snipe enemies from the nearby hillside. Fly to the top on a Banshee, and drop in from above. As a team, 343 informally talks about these sequences as "super-soldier base assaults," in which Master Chief gets to fully leverage all the options at his disposal to get the job done. "We want the game to always say 'yes,'" Crocker says. "So, we give the player tools and different ways of approaching the problems that we have placed between them and their destination."

Infinite's vast explorable areas offer an alternative to the linear golden path. They also dramatically increase the replayability, as Halo fans do what they always do – play again on a higher difficulty setting. As each area gradually connects up to previously explored locales, the scope of the massive Zeta Halo begins to come into focus and tease the potential for how the game could continue to expand into the future.





THE NEW ENTRY POINT

One of the most significant distinctions that sets Halo Infinite apart from its predecessors is its approach to multiplayer. The game's full multiplayer suite is available free-to-play; alongside its presence on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC, it means that competitive Halo has a massive audience to draw upon. Shared accounts between the platforms mean you can play where you want, making it easy to jump back and forth. Cross-play is enabled in social playlists, and even in some ranked playlists (excluding solo and duo queues, which remain input-specific). For perhaps the first time in franchise history, competitive multiplayer is more likely to be the entry point to the game for many players. "We want to make sure people understood they're joining a community that is going to evolve over time, and provide even more experiences," Staten says. "Even if you just wanted to sit and play competitive Halo multiplayer, you're going to have a bright future with what we're going to roll out season to season. But absolutely, we're hoping that if you enjoy that Halo sandbox style of play, and that feeling of being this powerful actor in this cool physical simulation, that you'll be tempted to go and take a look at what this campaign has to offer."

With that goal in mind, 343 Industries is taking great pains to make sure the competitive scene is inviting to many player types, with clear on-ramps for new players. A dedicated Academy mode provides weapon drills with multiple skill



levels, and introduces the fiction of the Spartans. Players can practice to their heart's content against an escalating sequence of more challenging bots, including in full human teams of four against A.I. The goal is to give newcomers a chance to discover the unique pace and flow of Halo multiplayer.

That defined identity is not easy to articulate, but longtime players seem to know it when they see it. Many of those lucky enough to try out the early tech preview playtests in recent months have remarked upon how "it just feels right." Speaking with the multiplayer developers, finding and implementing that Halo vibe has been a central goal. "Internally, when we

have those conversations, we call it 'The Dance,'" says lead multiplayer designer Andrew Witts. "The difference of Halo is that it has that dance between two players. When combat starts between two players, there's often a back and forth. The player who shoots first is not always the player who wins the engagement."

Another big distinction – especially compared to many competitors in the multiplayer space – is fair and equal starts. In a standard match, everyone shows up with an assault rifle and a side-kick pistol, and wins or losses don't come down to special powers, powerful load-outs, or boosted stats from hundreds of hours of prior play.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS: HALO TURNS 20



JOSEPH STATEN HEAD OF CREATIVE

My favorite moment in every Halo game's development cycle is when a game leaves our hands and lands in players' hands – when a game stops being 'ours' and becomes a shared experience with the Halo community. With the early Halo games, however, post-launch content wasn't really our focus. Yes, we shipped some awesome DLC multiplayer maps and modes and had a lively and wonderful online conversation with fans. But mostly our focus was on building the next big sequel, and this led to big gaps in the experience. Now, what makes me most excited about Halo Infinite is that launch is just the beginning. We're not only opening a whole new chapter in the Halo universe; we're starting a journey with Halo players that will deepen and expand from season to season, and for many years to come. I love this new focus and I can't wait to share more about where we're headed.





Instead, like many of the best Halo matches of the last 20 years, scavenging across the map is often key to victory. Weapon racks across the board reveal which weapon will spawn, and precisely when it will arrive, ensuring clear and deterministic understanding for both teams. The arrival of power weapons and vehicles is announced clearly to everyone, lending their match-shifting control to the players paying attention. Equipment (including the grappleshot) adds another pillar to the classic triangle of weapons, grenades, and melee. Moreover, most battlefields are positively littered with options to tweak your arsenal, leading to that delightful

sense of flexibility and customization amid a match.

The competitive experience also aims to cater to divergent player types through its modes. The unranked arena playlist supports slayer, capture the flag, the zone-capturing of Strongholds, and the return of the classic Oddball. These are team-focused experiences, often including vehicles, reminiscent of the Halo matches players recall from the early games. Meanwhile, Big Team Battle (BTB) is back, now with a boosted 12v12 player count. “When we started building BTB, we wanted it to feel like the fantasy of what you had in your head as a kid,” says multiplayer

associate creative director Tom French. “We wanted to create this layer of a battle fantasy, and so we wanted more players to facilitate that. You’re just seeing more chaos, which is fun; it’s kind of what BTB is about. It’s this kinetic, rompy sandbox, and we just let everyone smash into each other.” These are tumultuous and often over-the-top battles, with gunfire, explosions, and high-speed chases happening everywhere. More dedicated players can try their hand at ranked play, eking out advancement through solo, duo, and open queue playlists, and trying to prove their dominance.

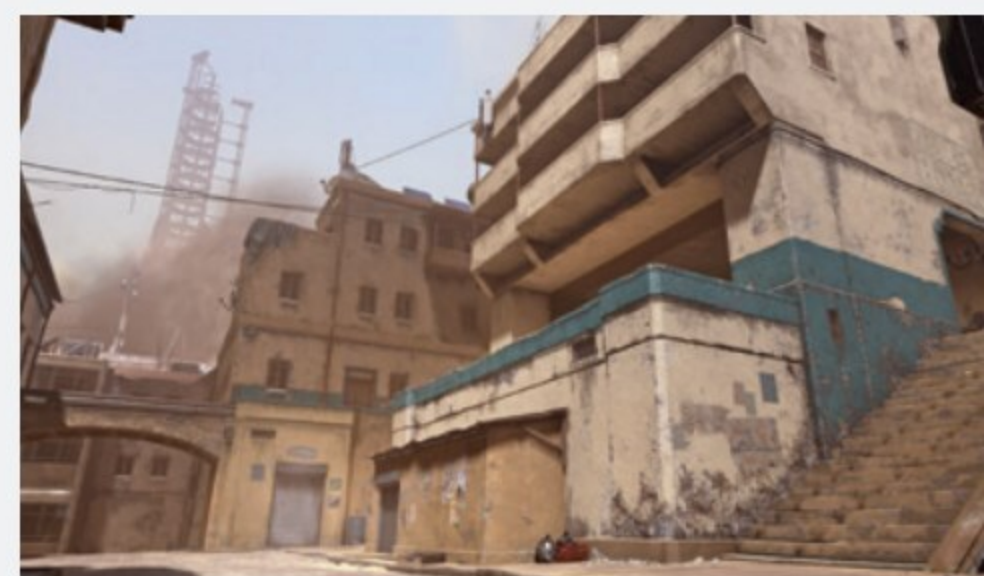
No matter what playlist you enjoy, players advance their Spartan with each match they play, as well as by completing designated daily and weekly challenges. That progression loop lets you overhaul and tweak the appearance of armor, weapons, vehicles, and more. “Every time you play a game, you’re feeling progress towards

THE WEAPONS OF HALO INFINITE



RAVAGER

Lob a triple-volley of plasma blasts into your opponents, and blanket the surrounding area in a zone of burning





a reward,” Hook says. “It’s not just about looking at bars. It’s about making sure that each step of the way, whether you’re playing an event, looking at what you’re trying to do for your week, or looking at the entire season, you see things that you want to earn. You see things that excite you that you want to go after and play.”

My favorite additions are the selectable A.I.s. Echoing Master Chief’s relationship with Cortana and The Weapon, these unlockable personalities let you cater the voice you hear in your head during matches, whether your preference is enthusiastic support, laughter, militaristic jargon, or just plain weirdness.

There’s little doubt that Halo Infinite’s free multiplayer is likely to bring an impressive pool of players to the table. Supported by season passes (that never expire) and alternate cosmetic customization purchases, 343’s experiment with separating multiplayer from the campaign is sure to be fascinating to watch. It will be interesting to learn what percentage of those competitive players leap to a Game Pass subscription or game purchase to experience the full story.

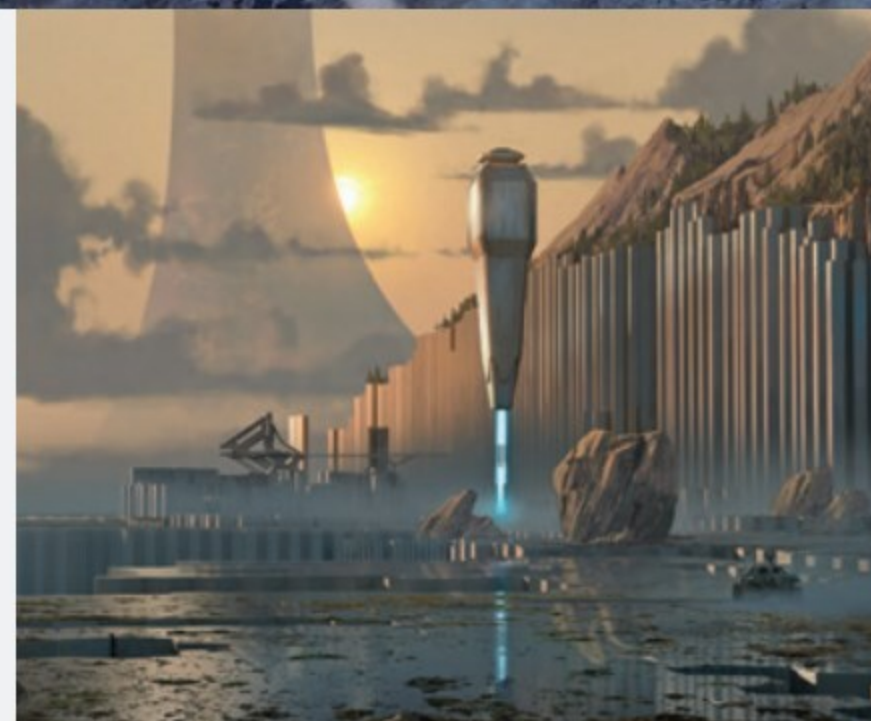
FULL CIRCLE

Before closing out our demo time with Halo Infinite, we jump ahead to several hours into the narrative, rejoining Master Chief to see a new playthrough of the sequence first shown back in July 2020. The assault on the anti-air cannons seen in that

public demo is a sequence that’s still in the game, but the difference in visual quality, detail, and overall polish is conspicuous. Environments are sharper. Animations and effects are more precise. Gameplay feels tighter. It’s an impressive reminder that 343 Industries has not sat idle in the extra time afforded after a lengthy delay.

Microsoft took a painful body blow in this new generation of gaming hardware, holding off its flagship release by a whole year, and leaving the Xbox Series X/S without its marquee launch title. And even with the extra time, players will lament the absence of two key features at launch: campaign cooperative play and the Forge. However, after hours exploring what it does have to offer, there’s no doubt in my mind that Halo Infinite is a far more impressive project now after the additional time in production. 343 Industries is insistent that launch day on December 8 is a starting point, not an ending.

Speaking to dozens of the team members behind the game, I can hear the passion and longtime enthusiasm for the series that grounds Halo Infinite in its own series history. That affection has woven itself into the new game, recalling the earliest expression of the Halo universe that we played in Combat Evolved way back in 2001. The zeal and excitement shine through, even as its developers have faced the same challenges all of us have in recent months. “Hope and heroism have always been part of the franchise,” Staten



says. “We’ve all gone through an incredibly difficult time over the last two years. This team has struggled, too. I genuinely hope that people feel that heroism and feel a brightness to it – Master Chief rising and standing tall, even in incredibly difficult circumstances. As someone who has flaws and blind spots and feels pain, and is able to join together with his comrades and fight through it, I think it’s very inspirational. I hope people play after a tough time in our history, and I hope it speaks to them, helps build community and build connections. That’s always been the power of Halo, to lead with hope and heroism and bring people together. And I really hope Infinite does that, too.”

Hungry for more details on Halo Infinite? We’ve got a whole month of dedicated coverage at gameinformer.com/halo-infinite. Don’t miss a beat in the lead-up to Halo Infinite’s launch on December 8!

Bayonetta 3

Fly me to the moon

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
2022

In the seven years since Platinum Games released Bayonetta 2, the developer has launched 10 other games. Some of those, like Nier Automata, have been massive hits for the company. Others, such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants in Manhattan, have been middling-to-poor releases. But finally, after years of waiting for any kind of update, the studio is getting back to its biggest series. In September, four years after first announcing the game, Platinum updated us on Bayonetta 3 – as brief as it may have been.

Re-revealed in a trailer during a recent Nintendo Direct, we first see a giant Angel attacking Shibuya Crossing, the famous crosswalk in Tokyo, Japan. The military, in vain, tries to take down the beast until a barrage of bullets hits it from off-screen. Puzzled, the beast turns around to see a statue of Lappy – the dog mascot from Platinum's 2019 release Astral Chain. This dog turns out to be a red-herring, though. When the monster tries to attack the Lappy

statue, time slows, and a familiar witch falls from the sky.

From here, we see about two minutes of gameplay across a couple of different levels. While Platinum's signature stylish action is on full display, some of the more interesting additions include a quick look at Bayonetta using the beast as a platform to boost herself closer to its head for a strong downward strike, the ability to use Punish Attacks (effectively finishers) on multiple enemies at once, and even destructible environments. At one point, we see the Angel from the beginning punched into a nearby building, smashing the large LCD screen on its facade.

Following this quick gameplay montage is the biggest change-up to the Bayonetta formula we've seen thus far: the ability to control the character's Infernal Demons. In the first two games, Bayonetta summoned a Demon from Inferno (Hell) for powerful finishers to defeat a boss. These were most often controllable via quick-time events and not much

else. In Bayonetta 3, it appears we'll have some control over the Demon and the ability to choose which to summon from a few different options. The trailer shows Bayonetta controlling Infernal Demons from the ground as they unleash devastating attacks on large-scale enemies.

Moreover, three different Demon options are visible on the left-hand side of the play screen, each mapped to buttons on the directional pad. The Infernal Demons shown include a dragon-like beast, a giant bird, and a spider. For a fun closer, we see the spider using its webbing to trap an enemy against the side of a building before Bayonetta rides a rocket into its belly. Subtle, this game is not.

Finally, the trailer closes with Bayonetta riding the aforementioned dragon as the buildings of Tokyo warp and collapse around her – almost as if they're forming Hell's scariest rollercoaster – all the while chasing an impossibly large boss enemy. The two beasts close in on each other before the screen transitions to a blood-red moon, and the game's logo appears.



Bayonetta's new hairstyle is one last detail to note about the trailer. The first game introduced us to Cereza, the child version of Bayonetta. In Bayonetta 3, the titular character has Cereza's iconic double braid hairstyle – all the way down to the same color ribbons. For a series weirdly obsessed with hair – in far more ways than one – it's a fun way to change up the character's look from Bayonetta 2 while tipping its hat towards the first game. Bayonetta's original designer, Mari Shimazaki, has been brought back to handle Bayonetta's designs in this game.

Bayonetta 3 is being directed by Yusuke Miyata. While this is Miyata's first time working on the series, he served as a game designer on The Wonderful 101 and Astral Chain at Platinum. Before joining the company, Miyata worked as a writer and designer on series such as Shin Megami Tensei, Metal Gear Solid, and Naruto Shippuden. While we don't know too much about Bayonetta 3 beyond this trailer, Miyata recently posted on Platinum's official web-

site about the game's ongoing and lengthy development.

"We're in the home stretch of development right now, working on making the core of the game even more fun and [play testing] nonstop," Miyata said. "As the culmination of this series loved by all of you, we're giving our all to make it a masterpiece worth[y] of the name Bayonetta, so please wait and anticipate just a bit longer!"

Bayonetta 3 is set to release sometime next year. It will be available exclusively on the Nintendo Switch.

» **Blake Hester**





Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy — The Definitive Edition

Blue-collar crimes, but better looking this time

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Rockstar Games

» **Developer**
Grove Street Games

» **Release**
November 11

Two decades after the landmark release of Grand Theft Auto III, Rockstar Games recently announced it would be launching a remastered trilogy encompassing the first three 3D GTA games – the aforementioned GTA III, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. This announcement confirms an earlier report from *Kotaku*, which learned about the upcoming rerelease back in August from its own sources.

Before this upcoming remaster, GTA III, Vice City, and San Andreas were not difficult games to get your hands on; Rockstar's done a good job of porting them to basically every console under the sun – including mobile – over the years. However, these ports were more or less just

the original games upscaled for HD. Especially in the case of a game like GTA III, which originally debuted in October 2001, this meant playing a game that's aged poorly. In preparation for this trilogy remaster, Rockstar delisted preexisting versions of the three games from digital storefronts, meaning that when Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy launches in November, it'll be the only way to buy them.

Grove Street Games is handling development, which despite sharing a name with the location from San Andreas where protagonist CJ Johnson lives, is not owned by Rockstar, which serves as publisher. Before this release, Grove Street worked with Rockstar bringing its 2006 game *Bully* to mobile platforms.

As initially reported by *Kotaku*, and confirmed by Rockstar, Unreal Engine 4 is being used for development. Rockstar promises higher resolution textures for buildings, roads, interiors, weapons, better draw distances, smoother surfaces, better lighting and water effects, and new foliage. Judging by the handful of screens Rockstar released alongside its announcement, the games look much more modern and accessible compared to their original releases. They definitely look nothing like Rockstar's more recent releases, such as *Red Dead Redemption II* or even *Grand Theft Auto V*, but sit somewhere in the middle.

One of the most promising details Rockstar shared concerns updates to the games' controls. As mentioned, going back to the original releases can be jarring. The rerelease features a control scheme based on GTA V, with improved combat and targeting across the board. A minimap with the ability to set waypoints is confirmed, as is the welcome inclusion of the ability to restart any failed mission immediately. The publisher also makes special mention of improved "drive-by controls" for San Andreas.

Platform-specific enhancements for Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy include



4K resolution support and up to 60 frames-per-second performance on PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X, while the Switch version features gyro aiming and touchscreen camera zooming, pans, and menu selection. Those playing on PC can expect Nvidia DLSS support. And lastly, the trilogy has new achievements via Rockstar's Social Club.

"GTA III helped clarify our approach to making games, and it's something that has stuck with us in every game we make, from GTA III through to GTA V, the Red Dead Redemption series, and everything else: We are focused on building worlds – and on making these worlds as believable, detailed, interesting, varied, and alive as possible," said Rockstar North art director Aaron Garbut in a press release. You can read more about Garbut's time working on GTA III and at Rockstar on page 22. "We want to make worlds that you feel like you are living in, that feel dynamic and filled with other characters. Where it's not just a façade that comes alive around you and for you, but as real a place as we can manage, and one that is filled with stories, characters, events and fun, interesting things to do."

Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy is available digitally for PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC now. A physical release for Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and Switch hits on December 7. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas – The Definitive Edition is available for free on Xbox Game Pass. And Grand Theft Auto III – The Definitive Edition will be available via PlayStation Now on December 7. » **Blake Hester**



Kirby And The Forgotten Land

Kirby's post-apocalyptic odyssey



» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
HAL Laboratory

» **Release**
Spring 2022

Kirby games are adorable and fun, but they tend to bleed together with similar designs and a yearly release cadence. That looks to change with Kirby and the Forgotten Land, which throws gaming's cutest – and hungriest – ball of fluff into a fully 3D world for the first time. It also whisks Kirby away from the familiar Dreamland to an eyebrow-raising new location.

Forgotten Land takes place on a ruined island city, and Kirby has somehow washed up on its shores. The most jarring aspect of this fallen metropolis is that it resembles a realistic human civilization. Crumbling skyscrapers stand abandoned, construction equipment litters the world, city streets and highways are laden with craters, and nature has reclaimed all of it. It's as if Kirby dropped into a Nick Jr. version of The Last of Us. Watching Kirby waddle through a derelict shopping

mall is bizarre, and the game's central mystery seems to revolve around learning about the society that once inhabited the island.

What's even more radical is that Kirby now occupies an open world. Gone is the 2D sidescrolling of old. Like Mario did decades earlier, Kirby freely explores his new surroundings, populated by equally adorable enemies and plenty of platforming challenges. What hasn't changed is Kirby's famous suction ability. He still vacuums foes to either spit back at targets or absorb their powers, of which Sword, Ice, Fire, Cutter, and Needle have been confirmed to appear. Kirby can still float over hazards too, which should prove handier than ever given Forgotten Land's added verticality.

The reveal trailer showed a glimpse of Kirby soaring through the city on his signature Warp Star. This footage makes us wonder if players can

take advantage of this cosmic mode of transportation at will or only during specific moments. At one point, Kirby is followed by a trio of ducklings. Nintendo also showed off a large-scale boss fight against a giant, boulder-tossing gorilla. Kirby games are traditionally laid-back affairs, but this battle appeared more involved than we expected. Kirby uses his Sword ability to hack at the gorilla's legs while jumping over its lumbering swings and sprinting around its body, searching for offensive openings. We hate to sound cliché, but it was hard not to think of a FromSoftware-style battle while watching.

Kirby and the Forgotten Land looks like the biggest head-turner for the long-running series since 2010's Epic Yarn. We can't wait to see how this surprising evolution shakes up the formula when it launches next spring.

» **Marcus Stewart**



Pokémon Brilliant Diamond And Shining Pearl

Polishing gems for a new generation to enjoy

Remakes of the first Nintendo DS Pokémon games dubbed Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl are two of the biggest releases set for Nintendo's holiday lineup. While the look and feel of these games mostly stays faithful to the originals, they also include modern conveniences and enhancements to unique experiences found in the source material.

The camera remains overhead, with characters populating Sinnoh presented as chibi models. However, instead of having sprite art, everything has been remade with 3D models, using new textures and lighting. You're also able to stroll around routes and towns with one of your Pokémon companions following you at all times. It's a welcome addition to these remakes carried over from Let's Go Pikachu and Eevee and the Sword and Shield Isle of Armor DLC.

Pokémon Super Contest Shows return to show off how cool, tough, or adorable your Pokémon are. A simple rhythm game has been added to the competition, requiring you to find the perfect time for your monster to unleash a spectacular move in hopes of wowing the judges. Winning these contests rewards you with Ball Capsule stickers which add animations and effects, like flames or confetti, when you bring a Pokémon into battle.

One big change compared to Diamond and Pearl is having full 3D models in Pokémon battles. Your trainer also sports a full-sized model allowing you to show off your customized outfit. EXP Share is applied to all



Pokémon in your party when a battle concludes, and like recent iterations, it's not a feature that can be turned off. Other quality-of-life additions like autosaves and seeing attack effectiveness on your Pokémon's moves also return.

Hidden Machines are also back, but this time around, winning Gym badges will unlock these moves to use out in the world without teaching them to your Pokémon. From your updated smartwatch device called a Pokétch, using an HM such as Strength to move a boulder will call a wild Pokémon to use the move for you. Pokétch also includes apps like a step counter, Pokémon friend checker, a calculator, an item-dowsing machine, and a drawing pad.

Trainers can also venture into the Grand Underground, a massive subterranean map comparative in size to

the above-ground region of Sinnoh. These depths, updated from their initial appearance in Diamond and Pearl, are a place for trainers to excavate items from the cavern walls and build Secret Bases where you can place Pokémon statues. These decorative figures affect which Pokémon you find in larger Underground rooms called Hideaways. Use certain bug Pokémon statues? You're more likely to see more bugs in the local Hideaway. Some sculptures even come in rare Shiny versions that give a different effect from their standard counterpart.

With features and aesthetics that straddle the line of old and new Pokémon eras, Brilliant Diamond and Shining Pearl looks to be a fascinating way to revisit these classic Sinnoh adventures when they release in November. » **John Carson**

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
(2 to 4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
ILCA

» **Release**
November 19



Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League

Betting on the best of the worst

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Games

» **Developer**
Rocksteady Studios

» **Release**
2022

What would it take to kill Superman? And The Flash? And Green Lantern? What about the rest of the Justice League on top of that? Even with an immaculate plan and a near-perfect team consisting of DC's finest metahumans and superheroes, it's near impossible. But when that team is four criminals pulled from Belle Reve Penitentiary and Arkham Asylum and thrown together to take on these impossible odds, it's practically suicide.

Rocksteady Studios returns to the universe it created with the Batman: Arkham series, which concluded with 2015's Arkham Knight. It unveiled a story trailer at DC's Fandome showcase in October, showing off more of the story, who's involved, and some of the gallows humor we've come

to expect with Suicide Squad. The showcase was wholly in-engine, albeit only footage from cutscenes, but what was there looked great. Characters have incredible detail where it counts. Each human member of the Squad has nuanced facial expressions that look believable, with detail rivaling some of the great faces found in NetherRealm's Injustice 2 or Mortal Kombat 11.

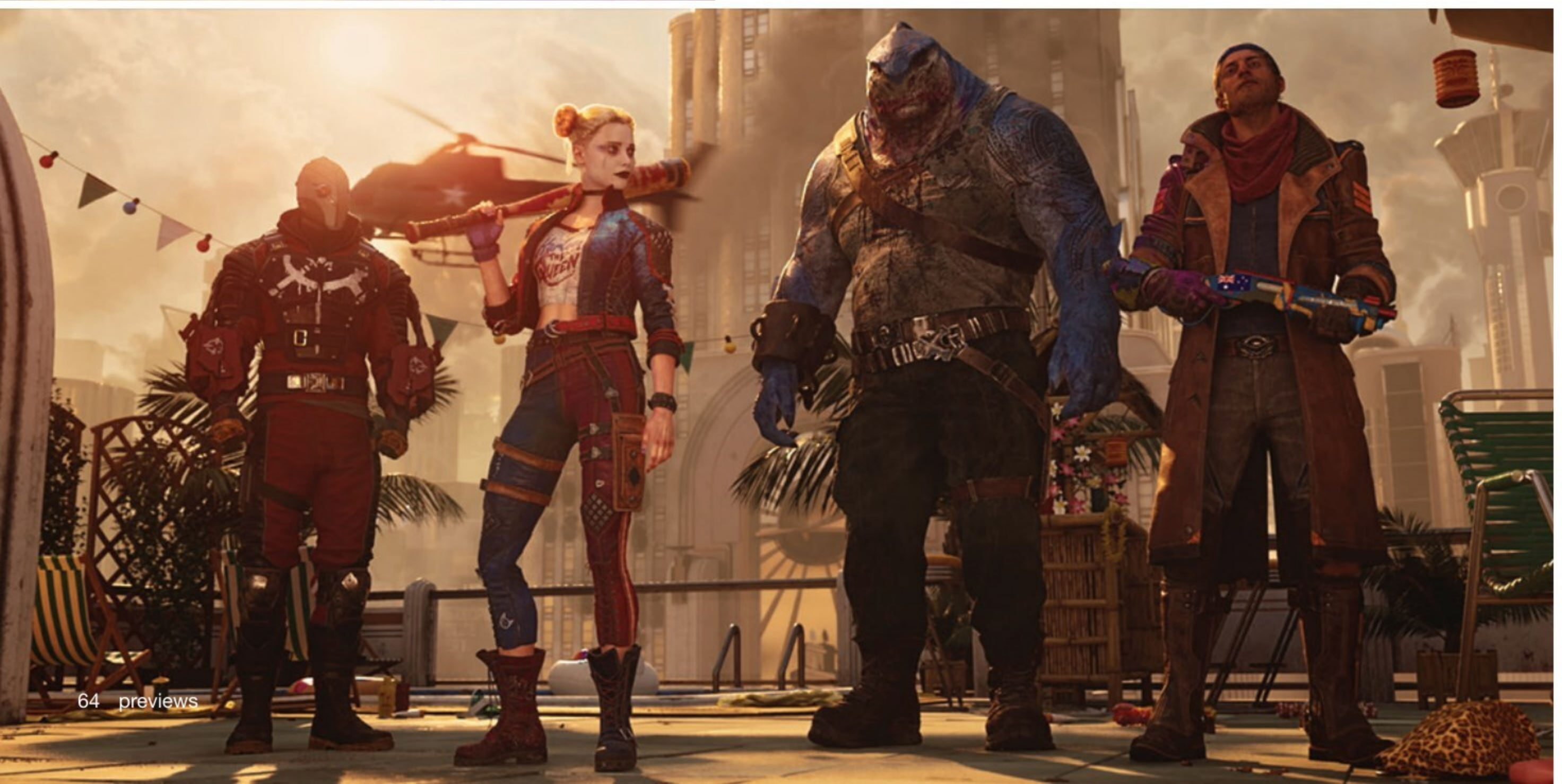
Amanda Waller, the director of Task Force X or, as it's commonly known, the Suicide Squad, gathers the disparate foursome of unsavory ne'er do-wells to do the unlikely: kill the Justice League. Waller chooses Deadshot, Harley Quinn, Captain Boomerang, and King Shark straight from confinement to comprise this version of the black-ops unit and loads a bomb in each of their necks in case any choose to abandon, or even stray from, the mission. Players can take on the challenge solo, switching between characters at will, or co-op with up to four players, having each person dedicated to controlling a specific team member.

Being the first group to infiltrate Metropolis successfully, Task Force X finds they're set to assassinate the Man of Steel himself and his cohorts in the Justice League. The city is crawling with alien beings, and mechanical tentacles wrap through the skyline. While otherworldly threats aren't unusual for the City of

Tomorrow, this situation is undoubtedly different. The cause of this near-apocalyptic chaos is the influence of Brainiac, who has not only sent countless hordes of monstrosities to Earth but has corrupted the greatest guardians of the planet. Superman and The Flash are indeed under the control of Brainiac – the spider veins surrounding their newly purple eyes are a dead giveaway – with Wonder Woman seemingly escaping that fate and having to fight against her friends.

Harley Quinn and crew aren't remotely heroes, even if there's a slight chance they can stop the calamity brought on by Brainiac, and they'll grab whatever chance they get to complain or do dastardly deeds. In the closing moments of the story trailer, the Squad seizes the opportunity to feed Waller false intel on an escaping Penguin who – also equipped with an explosive, brain-shocking device – is repeatedly jolted while the gang look on and laugh. That is until King Shark takes things too far and requests to blow up Cobblepot's head.

Unfortunately, we'll have to wait a little longer to take on this futile task. Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League is currently set for release sometime next year. If it's anything like the recent film based on the team or lives up to the quality of Rocksteady's Arkham trilogy, it'll be well worth the wait. » **John Carson**



Gotham Knights

A city on marionette strings



DC has long played with what Gotham would look like without the shadowy protection of Batman. Most recently, a peek into the future of the DC universe revealed Tim Fox, a potential replacement for the caped crusader (or at least a temporary stand-in) as a part of the Future State comic event. Montreal is building its own Gotham that has to figure out a way to survive a post-Batman world. Luckily, it can turn to the various youths Bruce Wayne raised and mentored to be vigilantes and heroes.

Nightwing, Robin, Batgirl, and Red Hood are on a mission to not only keep the villains of Gotham, like Mr. Freeze, in check. They also have to fill the massive void left by Batman and Commissioner Jim Gordon after their untimely demise and find out what ultimately happened to Bruce. The Knights will have far more to deal with than random street thugs and dooms-

day weather machines poised to snap the city into an ice age. Nightwing finds out from The Penguin that the city was never truly in check under the watch of Gordon and Batman. Instead, its history is meticulously sculpted by the Court of Owls, a group often foolishly dismissed as mere folklore by the residents of Gotham. It is an organization powerful enough to pull the strings on everyone in town, heroes and villains alike, yet no one speaks a word of them.

While we've known about the presence of the Court of Owls in Gotham Knights since its reveal, the secretive syndicate recently took center-stage in a story trailer and behind-the-scenes interviews shown off at DC Fandome. Scott Snyder introduced the Court in his legendary run as the writer of *Batman* in 2011, pitting the World's Greatest Detective against the best-kept secret in the history of Gotham. However, Gotham Knights'

interpretation of the Court of Owls takes things to a different level. Snyder says Gotham Knights takes what his team did with the Court and "elevated it beyond a lot of the borders that we had had." Narrative director on Gotham Knights, Ann Lemay, expanded on that thought with, "You can't rely on what you think you know about the Court. We've expanded, we've added to it."

A group of brainwashed assassins decked out in creepy owl masks known as the Talon will cause plenty of grief for the Gotham Knights in the name of the Court. These foot soldiers come in a couple of flavors; one is nimble and more animalistic, using their speed, sharp claws, and overwhelming numbers to tear down the heroes. The other is a lumbering foe who uses a deadly mace and a shield that contains a gun that shoots poison projectiles. Locations related to the Court of Owls are gothic and ornate. Elaborate mechanisms like a transforming birdcage elevator or implements of death such as pillars stacked with spinning blades and spiked augers litter the catacombs where the Talon roam.

Gotham Knights is still a ways off, slated for release in 2022. We're hopeful that while Warner Bros. Montreal has stayed tight-lipped for much of this year on the project, the studio will shed even more light on this co-op action-RPG in the coming months. » **John Carson**

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Games

» **Developer**
Warner Bros. Games
Montreal

» **Release**
2022



Oxenfree II: Lost Signals

Growing up and moving on

» **Platform**

PS5 • PS4
Switch • PC

» **Style**

1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**

MWM Interactive

» **Developer**

Night School Studio

» **Release**

2022



When talking about Oxenfree II: Lost Signals, Sean Krankel, the co-founder and CCO of developer Night School Studio, says he wouldn't call it a bigger game than the original Oxenfree. He'd call it a deeper game.

Returning to Oxenfree, the studio is taking a different approach with its storytelling while still maintaining its roots. Oxenfree II is still a coming-of-age story, but where other Night School games have navigated teenage years, Lost Signals' protagonist, Riley, is in her early thirties – considerably closer to the developers' ages.

Oxenfree II takes place five years after the original in Carmena, Riley's hometown. When strange radio signals begin broadcasting from Carmena, Riley goes home to investigate. We don't know too much about the game's plot beyond this, but during a recent hands-off preview,

we were able to get a sense of the depth of Oxenfree II's world – including its trippy time tear mechanics.

"The time tears, all this new stuff that we've added is not to have just the back-of-box bullet list; it's more to say like, 'how many plates can the player juggle at once?'" Krankel tells us.

A large portion of our demo shows Riley and another character, Jacob, exploring a cave below the town. After traveling through a time tear, the two are transported more than a hundred years into the past – coincidentally, at the moment, this cave suffered a massive collapse. The two must then work together in a tense escape sequence, making it out at the last second.

Traveling between the two different points in time presents the same level from two completely different perspectives. The series' iconic water-

color aesthetic does a ton of heavy lifting, bringing the giant world to life. However, the draw of this level is the banter between Riley and Jacob, which is playful, ironic, and somewhat awkward. Night School's dialogue mechanic, which allows the player to choose between different responses on the fly, makes a return.

As Night School co-founder and Oxenfree II writer Adam Hines tells it, the game is about self-discovery. Or maybe it's more accurate to say self-reinvention. And while I am interested in the mystery at the heart of Oxenfree II, I find this part of the game most appealing and promising. Speaking to Hines, he says it's a game about people changing courses in life and finding the path that best works for them. It's an interesting angle for a video game to tackle, especially from a studio primarily focused on stories about teenagers. With Riley, there's a chance for a more mature narrative that appeals to an older demographic, especially considering the story is written by people in that age bracket themselves.

"Definitely one of the big themes of the game is taking stock in the choices that you've made in your life that have gotten you to where you are," Hines says. "And knowing that it's never too late to say, 'You know what, this is not the right path for me, I want to make a change.' ... Or to say, 'You know what? I really do like the choices that I've made. Even though maybe the community or the world says that they were the wrong [choices], they were the right ones for me.'"

Oxenfree II is set to release sometime next year. » **Blake Hester**





The Gunk

A sticky situation

Outside of having perhaps the most fun title to say out loud, The Gunk is one of the coolest-looking under-the-radar games on the horizon. It also represents a significant change for developer Image & Form, the team responsible for the SteamWorld franchise. The game breaks away from cartoon-style 2D worlds to create a more mature, extraterrestrial 3D adventure with an intriguing premise.

You control Rani, who, along with her best friend, Becks, explores space to scout for resource-rich planets at the behest of a major corporation. Think of these two as the Silver Surfers to the corporation's all-consuming Galactus. The pair stumble upon a world that doesn't appear valuable at a glance, but they find more than they bargained for upon landing. A gooey, harmful substance the women appropriately christen the Gunk covers the exotic landscape and mysterious ruins. It's unclear where the Gunk came from, only that it's hindering the planet's life and must be removed to discover the secrets of the civilization that once inhabited the world.

Exploration, platforming, and environmental puzzle-solving are The Gunk's bread and butter. Rani's multi-use power glove sucks up the Gunk, which clears paths and causes plants such as spectacular trees to sprout. In one instance, removing Gunk causes a giant, tongue-like leaf to unfold over a gap, creating a natural bridge to cross. Image & Form says the game taps into the strange satisfaction of tidying up areas and describes The Gunk as an experience for those who dislike the act of cleaning but love the results of it. The Gunk

itself is a dynamic entity made up of smaller shapes created by reworking raymarching technology, usually reserved for non-interactive elements such as clouds. The tech gives the Gunk its fluid, lava lamp-style appearance and behavior, making it a fun element with which to play.

The power glove's other functions include grabbing and lobbing explosive seeds to clear rubble and crushing rocks for resources. It also scans your surroundings to unlock information as well as upgrades. In battle, the glove's pulse cannon can blast sentient Gunk creatures. Or you can just suck them up to toss elsewhere. The world itself is linear in design, though it has branching paths leading to optional puzzles and rewards. Environments look great and sport plenty of scenic variety. In addition to lush forests, we also saw Rani explore ruined temples, underground caverns, and foreboding industrial complexes. Between excursions, you'll regularly return to a base camp where you'll chat with Becks and your robotic companion CuRT. You'll turn collected materials into upgrades, but Image & Form emphasizes that The Gunk is not a crafting or survival game.

The Gunk can be wrapped up in six to eight hours, meaning time-strapped players can enjoy everything it has to offer in between the larger holiday releases. The game may present an entirely new challenge for Image & Form, but the studio says it has been itching to try something new for a long time, and it's earned the benefit of the doubt with its stellar work on the SteamWorld series. Everything we've seen of the game looks exceptional, and we can't wait to wade waist-deep into The Gunk when it launches this December.

» **Marcus Stewart**

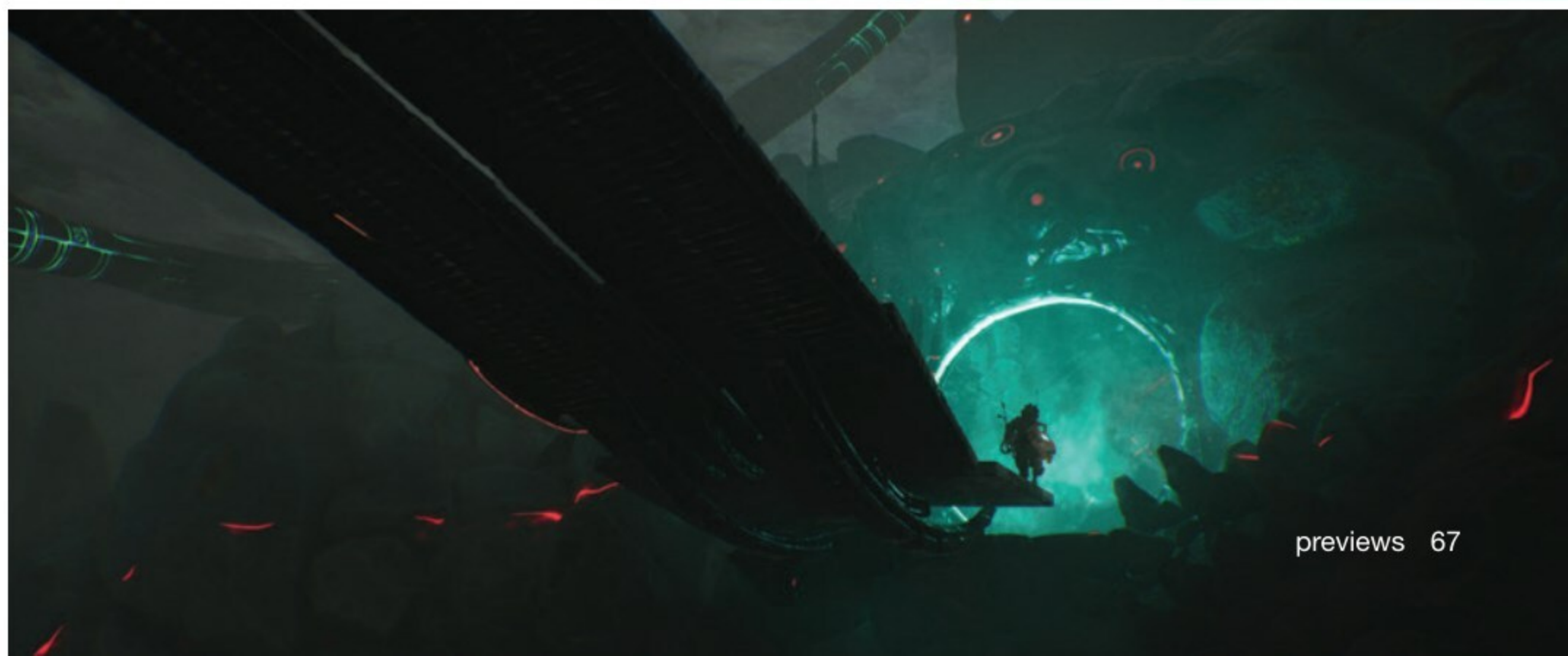
» **Platform**
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Thunderful

» **Developer**
Image & Form

» **Release**
December 2021



Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Frontline

Reinvention or identity crisis?



» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Stadia • Luna

» **Style**
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Bucharest

» **Release**
TBA

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Frontline is a massive free-to-play online shooter in the tactical-action series. The upcoming release promises unbound freedom and class-based squad combat across an enormous battleground. It also pushes the camera in from an intimate third-person perspective to a first-person view. The battle-royale-inspired game sounds bombastic as ever, but if you ask me, the Ghost Recon series is in the middle of an identity crisis. And Ubisoft's marketing asks fans to help shape the development of Frontline, which doesn't give me hope.

Ghost Recon Wildlands, released in 2017, was an attempt to differentiate the property from Ubisoft's other military shooters. The game offered four-player co-op in a vast open world, and while it launched with mediocre reviews, it slowly grew a loyal audience after years of free content updates. But after a shaky follow-up in Breakpoint, it's clear the series has been backed into a corner by other burgeoning titles in Ubisoft's catalog. The Division offers engaging co-op campaigns, intense multiplayer firefights, and the third-person gadget-focused combat that Ghost Recon was once identified by. Rainbow Six Siege delivers an unrivaled competitive FPS experience, and Far Cry is known for its established open-world formula. So maybe it makes sense that Ghost Recon is shaking up its format yet again?

Not quite a battle royale and not quite a team deathmatch, Frontline plants itself somewhere in between. The game's primary mode, Expedition, divides 100-plus players into squads of three and asks them to complete objectives scattered around Drakemoor Island, which offers a variety of biomes and weather systems that promise to create intense firefights. Teams have to achieve their objectives before their enemies do and subsequently must find their way to one of the map's extraction zones.

To successfully extract, you'll have to defend your position from enemy teams that want to claim your intel for themselves. Frontline's end-of-match antics remind me of matches in Ring of Elysium, which typically end in memorable white-knuckle escapes.

At the heart of Frontline is a class-based character system that offers myriad customization options. Classes have access to individual skill paths and an armory of gadgets that make each contractor unique. Equipment like smoke screen drones, automated turrets, and massive, deployable barricades change the landscape around them.

However, Ghost Recon will need more than futuristic gadgets and a significant player count to differentiate itself in today's saturated multiplayer market. Frontline will need memorable points of interest that make its map worth exploring, a class system with clearly designed roles, in-game objectives that create tension and consequence, and ultimately, rewards that keep new players coming back to the game.

Ghost Recon Frontline doesn't have a public release date, so it remains to be seen whether the project will successfully carve out a space for itself or fall prey to an ongoing identity crisis. As a fan of the series since it debuted in 2001, I'm hoping for the best. » **Alex Van Aken**



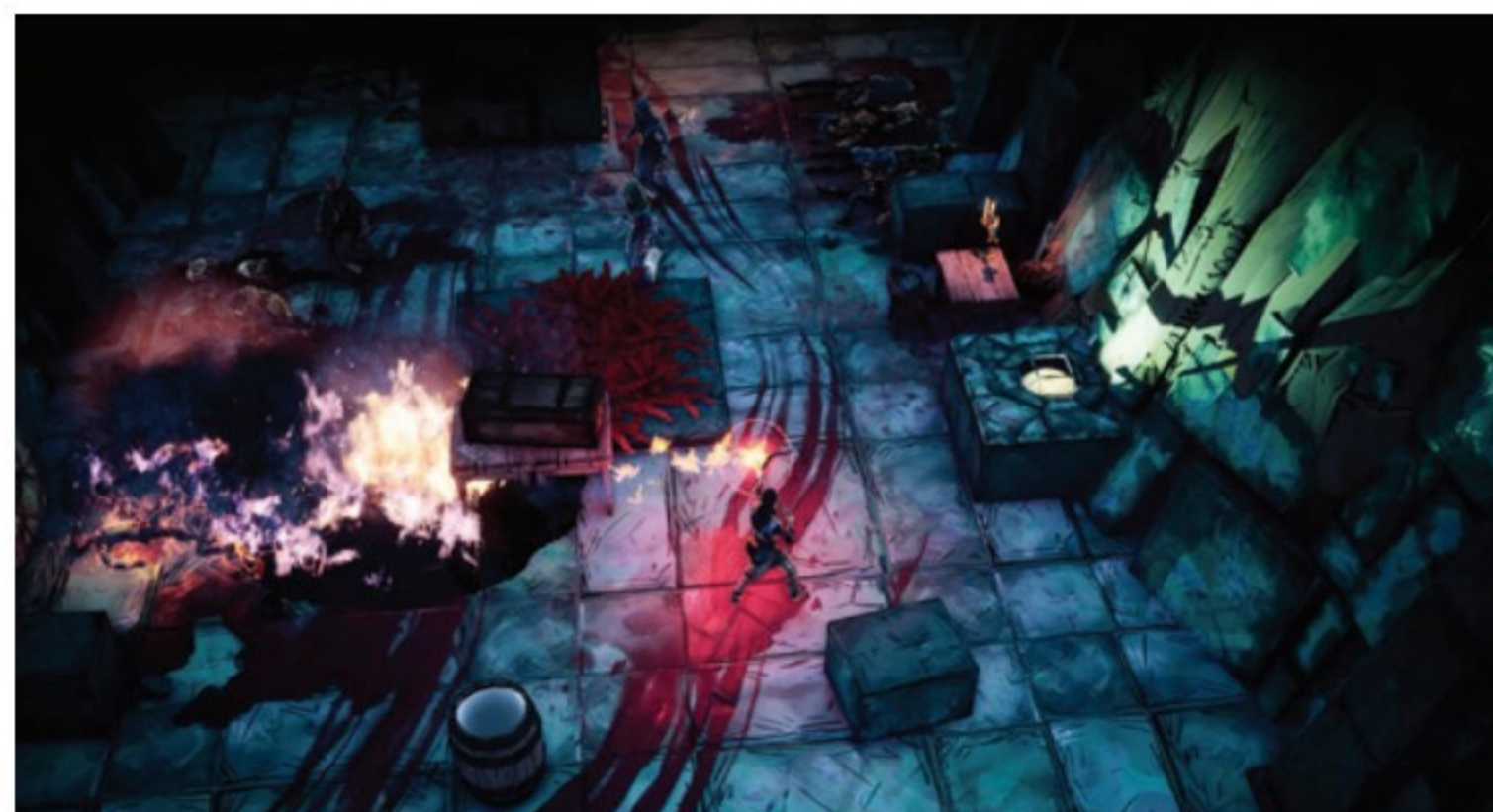
Weird West

Hands-on with Weird West – a frontier worth exploring

Weird West is the upcoming isometric twin-stick shooter from Wolfeye Studios, a relatively new developer headed by former Prey and Dishonored co-creators. It doesn't take long to feel their immersive sim handprints. In fact, once you're through the basics of Weird West's twin-stick shooter action, the same combat scenario experience in games like Dishonored makes an appearance, and it's a delight.

Do you go in guns blazing with your shotgun and spray and pray until everyone's dead? If so, hopefully, you've looted some dead coyotes for meat or stocked up on bandages in town. Or do you take a stealthier route? Hopefully, you've spotted the poison barrel on the cliff that you can kick onto the enemies below, which damages them and allows you to surprise them with some bullets.

Regardless of what you decide to do, combat plays out the same way mechanically. You use either your WASD keys or your left joystick to move around the area and your mouse or right stick to aim a sight-line on-screen in classic twin-stick shooter fashion. Different guns have different ranges and damage outputs, and fortunately, switching between them is easy even in the heat of an intense battle. I especially like that Weird West isn't super generous with ammunition, too, because it forced me to cycle through all the weapons at my disposal quite often.



In my couple of hours with Weird West, it was these combat scenarios that intrigued me most. I began to view them as small puzzles that doubled as opportunities to gun down some local gang members, and in doing so, Weird West's more immersive sim-nature shined.

Weird West's puzzle-like twin-stick shooter combat wasn't the only thing that piqued my interest. It features a beautiful (lightly) cel-shaded art style that feels especially distinct thanks to Weird West's three isometric view points – far out camera angle, a mid-angle, and a close zoom. Its synth-ish music reminded me of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, which adds a touch of horror to Weird West's vibe.

The only aspect of Weird West I found slightly lacking was the narrative. Admittedly, I was only able to

play a very small portion of the game, so things could change when the full story is open to me. However, right now, the bounty-hunter-coming-out-of-retirement storyline was the blandest part of my time with Weird West. That's not to say the actual dialogue in-game was rough – I quite enjoyed that, and I liked the side quests presented to me as well. I just wish the overarching narrative was as captivating early on as the rest of the game.

With its distinctive take on the Wild West, which feels like an alternate era where werewolves and the undead were as much a part of everyday life as coyotes and cattle, Weird West is doing a lot to demand my attention, even with a few drawbacks. I'll have my eye on the game when it releases later this year. » **Wesley LeBlanc**

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Devolver Digital

» **Developer**
Wolfeye Studios

» **Release**
January 11



Splatoon 3

Nintendo's colorful, ink-shooting series, Splatoon, has a new entry coming in 2022. Splatoon 3 was initially announced earlier this year, but we got a few more details on the game in September's Nintendo Direct. While many familiar features are returning, like Inklings and Octoling protagonists and the online 4v4 Turf Wars, new additions include a grapple-like weapon, the new Splatville location, and the campaign's central theme called Return of the Mammalians.



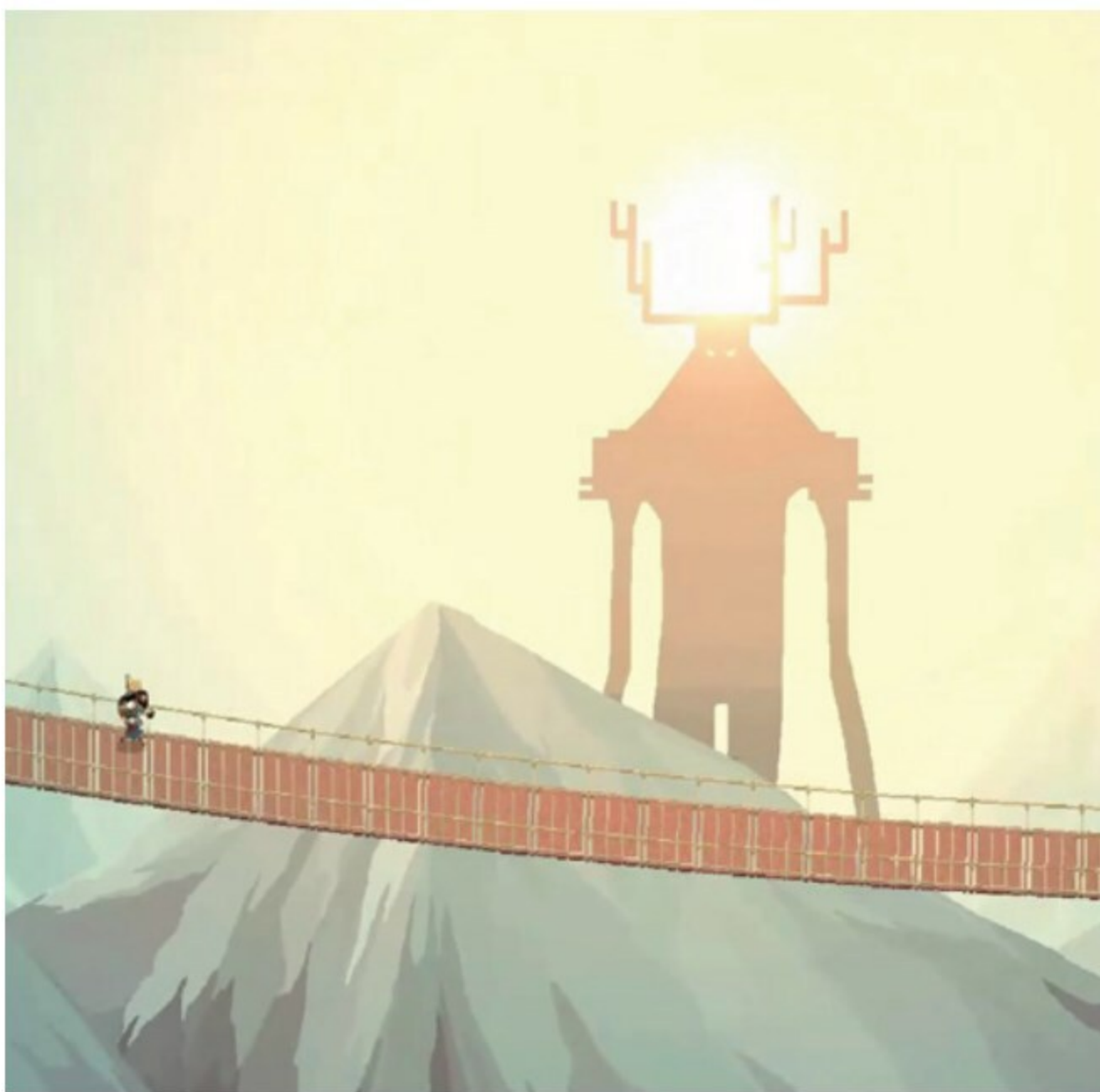
Triangle Strategy

In Triangle Strategy, you guide your characters through a choice-filled narrative with multiple paths depending on your decisions. Combat consists of turn-based tactical battles where you must take factors such as position and location into account. You can also use elemental chains, like casting fire to melt the ice beneath enemies, then using lightning to electrocute the water. Triangle Strategy comes to Switch on March 4.

Lil Gator Game

Saying Lil Gator Game is inspired by Zelda is an understatement. In its recent Steam Next Fest demo, the cheeky dialogue and quests to collect a wooden sword, shield/sled, floppy hat, and t-shirt paraglider left no doubt. Visually, it also channels A Short Hike, but it manages to retain a quirky personality all its own. Playing as the Lil Gator in the demo, you try to convince your older sister to put down her research project by staging a series of grand, pretend adventures. The full game launches on Switch and PC in 2022.





No Place For Bravery

A warrior stands amidst a bloody battlefield on a cliff overlooking a city built in the shade of a slain giant's bones. Sword and shield in hand, you'll play as Thorn, a veteran fighter who wanders the war-torn land in search of his missing daughter. No Place For Bravery is a 2D action title coming later this year to Switch and PC with haunting pixel visuals, challenging combat, and moral dilemmas, which will only grow more intense as the story continues.

Book Of Travels

In contrast to the well-known MMORPG genre, developer Might and Delight have dubbed Book of Travels a "TMORPG," with the "T" standing for "tiny." The categorization gives players some hint that this online experience may veer from usual expectations. However, the team promises the game will have an enchanting and lively open world to explore. Player-led adventure seems to be the goal, and while you can check it out in Steam Early Access now, Book of Travels won't get a full release for at least two years.



Chocobo GP

Chocobos are no stranger to racing. They've been a staple of Final Fantasy minigames and even got the ultimate honor of starring in 1999's Chocobo Racing for PS1. Now Square Enix is ready to give the Final Fantasy mascot another chance to strut its stuff on the racetrack with Chocobo GP for Switch. The game looks to be taking plenty of cues from Mario Kart, where you'll throw things like fireballs to divert your competition's progress and use drifting to your advantage. You race as beloved Final Fantasy characters, such as Vivi or a Moogles, who all have their own unique set of wheels. Even better? The game boasts a story mode, supports local and online multiplayer, and has iconic courses based on memorable Final Fantasy locales, from the streets of Alexandria to Zozo and the Gold Saucer. Chocobo GP launches sometime in 2022.





A Space For The Unbound

Coming to PC and PlayStation consoles next year, A Space for the Unbound is an intriguing pixel art title that blends everyday life with the supernatural. Set in rural Indonesia in the '90s, the game follows two high schoolers coming to terms with their changing relationship, inner demons, and powers beyond their control. The free prologue, out now on PC, lets you jump into other characters' minds to influence their thinking and has an ending that treads into cosmic horror territory.

Layers Of Fear Sequel

Bloober Team, maker of The Medium and Blair Witch, is returning to the series that kicked off its current streak of creepy experiences: Layers of Fear. A third entry in the psychological horror series is in the works, but outside of a brief teaser trailer, we know next to nothing about it. The team only revealed the yet-to-be-titled game is being made in Unreal Engine 5. Whatever the game is, it's bound to raise hairs, but we'll have to wait until 2022 to find out more.



A Memoir Blue

A Memoir Blue is an interactive story about a mother/daughter relationship, inspired by a trip developer Shelley Chen took when she was young. For Chen, the trip was a wonderful day, full of adventure and an exciting train ride, but she didn't realize until years later that her mother was escaping a bad marriage and mustering the courage to start a new life. You dive into the main character's past with 2D animations representing recollections and 3D showcasing the present as the character re-evaluates these moments. The story is told entirely without words, depending on the atmosphere, music, and character animations to depict the emotional journey. A Memoir Blue will hit all major platforms (PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC), but still doesn't have an official release date.

Stranger Of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin

Have you ever wanted to play a hardcore action RPG in the spirit of Nioh set in the world of Final Fantasy? Final Fantasy Origin takes the universe, tunes, enemies, and more from the original Final Fantasy game and lets players get wild with all kinds of different job classes, gear, and more. It's a combination that we never knew we wanted, wrapped with some edgy '90s accouterments, and we can't wait to charge headlong into the full game when it lands March 18 on PlayStation and Xbox consoles, as well as PC. We're here to kill Chaos!



Choo-Choo Charles

Move over, Thomas. A new, terrifying locomotive is calling the railways home. Developed by Two Star Games, Choo-Choo Charles is an open-world survival horror game that's, simply put, off the rails. You'll commandeer a train of your own, completing quests for the oddball locals of a terrorized island. Scraps scattered throughout the land help bolster your defenses and DPS so that when Charles finally shows himself, you can send the wheeled creature packing with bullets to his grotesque face. Choo-Choo Charles will be released in the first quarter of 2022 on PC.



Salt And Sacrifice

After playing the first hour of Ska Studios' upcoming release, it's clear the developer's penchant for high quality and high challenge remains intact. After committing one of several unforgivable crimes, your character chooses to become an inquisitor who hunts down mages rather than face the ultimate punishment. The side-scrolling levels are winding and fun to explore, and even combat against the lowliest opponent can mean death if you don't play defensively and strike with deliberate timing. Watch for full release on PlayStation platforms and PC sometime in 2022. 💎



EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 341

75 Far Cry 6
78 Metroid Dread

Far Cry 6 and Metroid Dread both rely heavily on the established formulas of their respective franchises, but each title refines its mechanics so perfectly that we had to highlight both games this issue! Read the full review for Far Cry 6 to find out how guerilla fighter Dani Rojas leads a revolution on the fictional island nation of Yara. Then turn to page 78 to learn why Metroid Dread is one of the most intense Metroid games to date.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Giblets - just gross.

Far Cry 6

The spark that ignites the fire

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 341

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Toronto **Release** October 7 **Rating** M

9

From the Montana wilderness to the frozen peaks of the Himalayas, the Far Cry franchise has taken players across the globe for action-packed adventures. Far Cry 6 carries on the series' trademark of delivering a massive, open-world playground where players fight for control against a powerful villain. While the dark story sometimes contrasts harshly with goofy side content and characters, Far Cry 6 fires on all cylinders to deliver one of the series' best games.

Far Cry 6 is a nonstop thrill ride from start to finish, delivering a wide variety of activities to pursue within its vast open world. The mainline missions often center on infiltrating enemy-controlled territories to undermine the rule of Antón Castillo, the ruthless dictator of the fictional Caribbean nation of Yara. Whether you're blowing up Castillo's fuel tanks, burning down his plantations, or taking out high-value targets, Far Cry 6 offers a variety of action-packed ways to topple the ruling regime.

True to the series, Far Cry 6 enables you to play your way. Strong shooting mechanics allowed me to easily string together headshots with my suppressed rifle as I moved through an area undetected. If I messed up a kill and the enemy caught on to my presence, the solid gunplay works well in the chaos of a firefight.

Most of the time, I used standard rifles, pistols, and shotguns (all of which are customizable). You also have access to unique, unlockable Resolver weapons (special guns with unique abilities and attributes) and Supremos (ultimate abilities that operate on a cooldown), which add a ton of firepower to your repertoire. I preferred to use stealthy tactics whenever possible, so I loved bringing a Resolver nail gun for silent take-downs. However, I was also glad to have a Supremo with homing rockets handy to take out armored tanks and pesky helicopters.

If you want a break from the main story, the massive and utterly gorgeous island of Yara offers terrific variety and seemingly unending side content. Taking down military checkpoints, blasting anti-aircraft cannons, and helping characters with side missions are all supremely satisfying ways to nudge Castillo's empire toward erosion. Despite Yara's mas-

sive size, getting to your next destination is easy thanks to summonable vehicles and a wingsuit; you can even airdrop onto fast-travel points to quickly soar in any direction.

While you can approach most situations however you like, the A.I. sometimes impedes your plans. At times, enemies disregarded nearby dead bodies, while other times, they had a seemingly supernatural perception of my presence. When combined with uneven difficulty spikes and occasionally unforgiving checkpoints, these inconsistencies lead to frustrating moments in an otherwise excellent experience.

Narratively, Far Cry 6 starts with a punch to the gut. As Dani Rojas, you have your one-way ticket out of Yara. After things go south through a series of emotional scenes, Dani joins the resistance. As a member of Libertad, Dani's primary task is recruiting other guerrillas, with the eventual goal of dethroning Yara's bloodthirsty dictator.

Giancarlo Esposito, of *Breaking Bad* and *The Mandalorian* fame, masterfully portrays President Castillo. While he only appears in cutscenes between main story missions, his presence looms large thanks to regularly played propaganda speeches, giant billboards featuring his face, and his name at the center of most conversations. In Far Cry's rich annals of fantastic antagonists, Castillo stands among the most menacing. But Castillo isn't

the only noteworthy villain, as he surrounds himself with truly despicable people who I couldn't wait to take a shot at.

The rest of the cast is memorable, and Dani is perhaps the best Far Cry protagonist to date. However, for every authentic character, there's another that is a caricature. These borderline cartoonish people are especially jarring in a story centered on a bloody revolution. You see plenty of terrible things happen to both good and bad people, and Far Cry 6 still struggles with the precarious balancing act of telling a dark, serious story and delivering the carefree thrills players expect from the franchise.

The dissonance between Far Cry's two sides has always been challenging to reconcile, but Far Cry 6 handles this balance better than most entries in the series. Many zanier missions and storylines are relegated to side content and player choice; if you don't want to free a group of hostages using a CD-launching gun alongside a cute wiener dog named Chorizo, you don't have to.

Far Cry 6 is a compelling open-world action game from the early moments through the final confrontation. The main storyline is exciting, and I never ran into a shortage of side content to enjoy. Far Cry 6 isn't revolutionary in its accomplishments, but it executes the franchise's formula better than any entry before it.

» **Brian Shea**

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Stadia • Luna

» **Concept**

Lead a revolution and topple the ruthless dictator of a fictional Caribbean nation of Yara in the latest entry in the long-running open-world franchise

» **Graphics**

Lush environments and utterly stunning vistas are occasionally brought down by immersion-breaking glitches

» **Sound**

Stellar voice acting and a great soundtrack accompany your journey through Yara

» **Playability**

True to the franchise's form, Far Cry 6 allows you to approach nearly every situation however you like, offering gear and weaponry catering to your playstyle

» **Entertainment**

Whether you're pushing the mainline story forward or pursuing side missions, Far Cry 6 provides a cornucopia of fun and engaging activities, wrapped in the series' best gameplay and most beautiful setting

» **Replay Value**

Moderately high



Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy

Enthralling space madness

8.5

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Square Enix Developer Eidos Montreal Release October 26 Rating T

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept

A linear, story-driven action game that embraces the true spirit of Guardians through extensive dialogue. The gameplay delivers mixed results

» Graphics

The worlds are science-fiction works of art that blend colors in fascinating ways. The character models are also quite good and convey genuine emotion even without any words being spoken

» Sound

A wonderful soundtrack filled with 1980s hits and great orchestration heightens dramatic moments. All of the voicework is top-notch, but Star-Lord takes a while to truly find his groove

» Playability

Star-Lord controls admirably, and issuing commands to his teammates is a simple process with plenty of depth

» Entertainment

A rarity in gaming, Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy is at its best when the characters are rambling on

» Replay Value

High

From the moment the Guardians of the Galaxy are introduced as a space-faring team that will do anything for a quick buck, it's abundantly clear how much of a dysfunctional mess they are. Gamora and Rocket are at each other's throats. Drax and Star-Lord don't see eye to eye. And no one is paying attention to Groot. For the next 15-plus hours of gameplay, I listened to these misfits bicker, hurl insults, and chatter non-stop – much to my enjoyment.

When I say "nonstop," I mean they never stop talking. A second rarely goes by without the Guardians sharing their thoughts. I'm not exaggerating this frequency. Any moments of quiet made me question if the game was not working properly. The amount of dialogue that Eidos-Montreal crafted is off the charts, and most of it is nicely penned, offering the witty humor, heartfelt intimacy, and sheer chaos you'd expect from the Guardians.

Drax's inability to comprehend common colloquialisms and phrases brings big laughs and is just as good as James Gunn's take on the character in the *Guardians*' movies. I've never said this in a review before, but the dialogue is the best part of the game. Eidos-Montreal knocked it out of the park. The rest of the game delivers plenty of fun but with varying levels of quality and polish – the latter subtly hurting critical areas of the experience.

It took me a few hours to warm up to both Star-Lord and the combat system. Peter Quill is a bit grating from the outset but comes around when the team dynamic begins to gel,

and the story softens from its overall bombastic tone to allow him to show his emotional side. I ended up adoring him over time, especially when he's talking to himself.

His story is well written, and Eidos-Montreal did an excellent job injecting his leadership qualities into the action and decision-making. Players are in total control of Star-Lord and will determine the road your team takes. These choices aren't on the same seismic scale as a *Mass Effect* game and don't change the story much, but do offer fun alternate sequences and even more dialogue.

Each world that is visited pushes the Guardians to lean into their unique abilities to navigate treacherous terrain. The paths forward are always linear and filled with platforming sequences and combat arenas, much like the *Uncharted* games. While the player only controls Star-Lord – a decision that works well for all gameplay aspects – each Guardian can be summoned with a button press to perform a specific task. These brief inputs work well, and Eidos-Montreal even warps the character to the desired location to make sure you are moving forward at a solid pace. You can summon Drax to knock over a pillar or Gamora to leap up onto a wall to give you a boost up to a platform. All the Guardians' moves are used for environmental puzzle solving, which starts fun but loses its luster through repeated solutions.

The Guardians also play massive roles in combat and are as powerful as you would hope. For Star-Lord, however, this is not a game I'd bill as a power fantasy. His blasters are weak,

and he must work hard to drop even the lowliest of foes. All the Guardians need to be used in strategic ways to find success. Star-Lord can dash around quickly and tick away at the enemy's health, but his most significant contribution is as a play-maker. When he wants to call upon a Guardian, time slows, and he can tell them to perform a desired ability. It's not a power fantasy, but a teamwork fantasy that ends up being immensely satisfying when everything is clicking as it should.

At its peak, combat is handled admirably through the controls, allowing the player to whip across the arena, quickly highlight targets, and just as swiftly tell each Guardian what to do. Given how many characters are onscreen at any given time, the fray looks chaotic, but there's a violent beauty to it, and you oversee all of it, barking out commands to rain death in various ways. The Guardians can also chain together most moves to truly show the team's power. By the end of the game, the battles are wildly entertaining and deliver a good challenge. Oddly, the game's most powerful ability is a pep talk by Star-Lord, which always carries a little humor, but pauses combat for far too long and ends up being quite annoying.

Now the bad news: The opening hours of combat are a rough and uneventful ride. Before legitimate threats come out of the woodwork, the Guardians take on gelatinous cubes and spheres, conflicts that are as dull as they sound. With a good majority of abilities locked away for over half of the game, the true potential of the Guardians is kept at bay for far too long, and the experience suffers. This game is at its best when it's over the top, and it eventually gets there, but not quickly enough. A lack of polish across the entire experience also hurts. Some animations are a bit jumpy, specific gameplay mechanics like sliding don't offer much precision, and combat's framerate can be rough at times.

As a fan of the Guardians' comic books and movies, I thoroughly enjoyed Eidos-Montreal's unique take on this supergroup. The nonstop character banter and nicely designed choices make this a journey worth taking, even if the gameplay takes a little too long to highlight the team's true potential. » **Andrew Reiner**



Back 4 Blood

A familiar fright

Style 1-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive
Developer Turtle Rock Studios **Release** October 12 **Rating** M



Back 4 Blood's concept is a slam dunk. Give the team responsible for trailblazing the zombie co-op shooter with *Left 4 Dead* another shot at the genre, adding a plethora of modern trappings and a new wrinkle to differentiate it from Turtle Rock Studios' past work. But after countless tech tests and some massive shoes to fill, can *Back 4 Blood* recapture the magic? While not perfect, *Back 4 Blood* is a genuinely fun time with friends, and it has enough new tricks to keep first-person shooter fans coming back for more.

Back 4 Blood's gunplay is a major highlight. The weapons should be familiar to anyone who's played titles like *Left 4 Dead* before, but the thrilling moment-to-moment battles with the undead are satisfying. Everything from crushing Ridden craniums with your nail-covered bat to mowing down zombie hordes with an LMG has the proper weight, controller-rumble, and sound effects to immerse you in an intense experience.

Back 4 Blood is difficult, especially at the start, and I was surprised by its unrelenting enemy mobs. While I loved the heated moments where victory is in question, the difficulty balance is off. The changes in difficulty come from the Game Director. This system tinkers with players' experiences from level to level, throwing everything from fog to flaming infected at you, meaning two playthroughs of the same level can be completely different. There were too many times I would get through a level with minor hiccups, only to get overpowered within minutes of the next segment and vice-versa. The Director also seems

to overcorrect after zombies became too oppressive, and my squad would easily walk through the rest of a level with little more than a scratch after a big fight. The game can strike the right balance, but I wish those highs and lows had been tuned to offer a more consistent experience.

That difficulty curve is more manageable thanks to the card system, Turtle Rock's wrinkle on the classic formula. As players progress through the co-op campaign, they gain supply points to spend on upgrade cards for each Cleaner. These range from minor 10 percent boosts to vital skills such as gaining health back from kills to an extra life if your team fails its objective. The experience started to click for me when I began to build classes that matched my situation. By Act 3, I had assembled enough cards to create a shotgun-wielding tank that could sprint into the fray, mow down dozens of zombies, and run back without losing much HP, thanks to a card that gave me health for landing hits with my boom shot. Another time, my team and I were failing to finish off a boss, only to roll over him when we all played a card that added 20 percent damage to the special Ridden's weak spot. The more my team varied our decks and loadouts, the less we'd have to drop ammo for one another, and we became a more efficient unit. Even after I faced the final boss, I still had plenty of cards to unlock and new reasons to return to the earlier levels.

As with most co-op-focused games, *Back 4 Blood* shines brightest when you have a full team shredding through the special Ridden. Whether we were yelling orders to one another

or laughing as someone shrieked after being tackled by one of the wall-hugging Sleepers, *Back 4 Blood* reminded me why I spent so many hours fighting the undead in the past and why I'm excited to do it all over again in 2021.

On the flip side, solo players may have fewer reasons to be excited. *Back 4 Blood*'s AI companions are competent and helpful when you need an extra boost of health or ammo. But the lack of stat tracking, supply points, or even achievement unlocks kept me far away from the solo action. That's a disappointing reality for players who want to enjoy the game on their own.

Finally, I enjoyed *Back 4 Blood*'s Swarm mode, which pits Cleaners against the Ridden in sub-sections of the campaign to battle in round-based encounters. Teams take turns playing as either Ridden or Cleaners, and whoever lasts the longest as the humans wins the round. I enjoyed playing as the undead, but I don't love how some of the special Ridden like the Tallboy control and longed for the intense matches of the campaign. The mode isn't offensively bad but pales in comparison to the rest of the game's engrossing co-op package. After a few matches in this PvP mode, I was content to put it down to go back to PvE.

Back 4 Blood is one of my comfort food games of 2021. It is an excellent time with friends that scratches an itch I've had since the glory days of *Left 4 Dead*. While it never reaches the heights of its inspiration, the addition of cards makes me hungry to play more, even when the game isn't at its strongest. » **Alex Stadnik**

8

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Squad up with friends to take on hordes of undead while trying to clean the world of Ridden

» Graphics

The levels start to feel a bit samey, but *Back 4 Blood*'s world contains an impressive amount of grotesque detail

» Sound

The music ramps appropriately to amp up the tension, and mowing down zombies has a satisfying pop

» Playability

Using the card system and a satisfying array of combat tools, players mold their characters to adapt in a difficult and everchanging undead landscape

» Entertainment

Back 4 Blood shines when playing with others and has enough systems, spooks, and FPS fun to make me want to come back for more

» Replay Value

High



Metroid Dread

Astro dreadnought

9

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 341

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** MercurySteam **Release** October 8 **Rating** T

Switch

» Concept

After 19 years, Nintendo finally delivers an official sequel to Metroid Fusion that concludes Samus Aran's lifelong battle with a race of deadly alien organisms

» Graphics

Laser flashes, smoke plumes, and other visual effects are a feast for the senses, but the action remains easy to read, so you never feel lost

» Sound

Combat effects and boss music get the blood pumping, but the ambient and atmospheric soundtrack is more subdued than previous entries

» Playability

The action is smooth, and a constant drip-feed of new abilities and upgrades helps you navigate the sprawling caverns of Planet ZDR

» Entertainment

Intense combat and a series of challenging boss fights require a high level of play, but the thrill of victory is incredibly sweet

» Replay Value

Moderate

The Metroid series is largely defined by its haunting atmosphere and ominous tone. Inspired by the *Alien* film franchise and the works of H.R. Giger, Metroid has always been only a few steps removed from the horror genre. Metroid Dread inches the series even closer. The moment Samus sets foot on Planet ZDR, she becomes prey. Every deadly creature – and machine – in the world is hungry for Samus' blood, and she is trapped miles below the planet's surface, far from her ship. And, the only way out is through the barrel of her arm cannon. While Samus' latest adventure delivers the classic exploration-based platforming/action we've come to expect, I never shook the all-encompassing anxiety that gives this adventure its name... and I loved every minute of it.

Metroid helped pioneer the idea of exploring large, non-linear spaces, so the world of ZDR and its disparate zones are essential to Metroid Dread. The quiet subterranean waterfalls of Artaria stand in stark contrast to the deadly lava flows of Cataris. Meanwhile, Burenia is home to a massive underground ocean teeming with carnivorous sealife. These environments feel alive; rainwater runs down the sides of an alien tram system, cool air drifts off the sides of frozen platforms, and exotic bugs gather around light sources only to scatter to the shadows when Samus approaches.

Exploring these foreign locales is continually rewarding thanks to essential upgrades scattered across

Planet ZDR like a trail of bread crumbs. The handful of new abilities are incredibly empowering. I especially enjoyed Samus' new storm missiles, which allow her to lock onto multiple targets before unleashing a volley of explosives. Unfortunately, most of Dread's upgrades are old standbys that MercurySteam seemed obligated to include. I recognize that Metroid wouldn't feel the same without the morph ball, which allows Samus to squeeze into narrow vents, but finding this upgrade several hours into a new Metroid game isn't exciting. I wish Samus had started with more of her traditional abilities, leaving room for flashier upgrades. As it is, Metroid Dread feels like it's occasionally retreading old ground, but this is a small disappointment in an otherwise great experience.

Thankfully, Dread does a few things to shake up the old formula, and one of the most significant new additions comes in the form of a new enemy type called E.M.M.I. These Extraplanetary Multifunction Mobile Identifiers are powerful robots equipped with an arsenal of gadgets that could make a starship blush. E.M.M.I.s are so sturdy that Samus cannot beat them in a fair fight; she must evade them or hide, using a new cloaking device that grants temporary invisibility. These tense cat and mouse encounters left me sweating, and each time I encountered an E.M.M.I., I felt my stomach drop as I frantically ran for safety.

At set moments in the story, Samus temporarily upgrades her arm cannon, allowing you to turn

the tables on the E.M.M.I. Even fully armed, these encounters require careful timing and quick footwork as one wrong move can leave you staring at a Game Over screen. Naturally, overcoming these challenges is a rewarding triumph. Likewise, Dread's other boss encounters offer a sizeable challenge. For example, the giant three-eyed green reptile Kraid returns. This battle takes place in a confined space, and dodging the spikes from his belly then bounding up the sides of the wall to shoot him in the face was incredibly harrowing. Thankfully, each boss has a recognizable pattern, so these battles seem fair. Overcoming each combat mountain left me in a heart-pounding euphoric state.

Metroid Dread begins with Samus stranded at the bottom of Planet ZDR's sprawling unground network. This is an inversion of the traditional opening that frequently has Samus descending into the heart of darkness, implying that MercurySteam is ready to rearrange the Metroid formula. Don't be fooled; Metroid Dread follows Nintendo's familiar blueprint for better or worse – but mostly for the better. This journey isn't scary in the traditional sense. I never jumped out of my seat after rounding a corner and coming face-to-face with an alien monstrosity. Nevertheless, Dread's atmosphere is powerful, and its imposing boss encounters are enough to ensure it earns its title. Despite a few hiccups in this timeworn pattern, Metroid Dread is a white knuckle thrill ride that you shouldn't fear. » **Ben Reeves**

Mario Party Superstars

Reliable party tricks

Style 1 to 4-Player Party (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** October 29 **Rating** E

8

Switch

» Concept

Relive some of the best and most iconic minigames and boards from the long history of Mario Party

» Graphics

Seeing series favorites remade with modern visuals is a delight

» Sound

Modernized music brings back memories of time spent exploring these boards on N64, and having the option to toggle to the original tracks is a nice touch

» Playability

Allowing for the use of Pro Controllers – after the last game required single Joy-Cons – is a welcome change

» Entertainment

Whether you grew up with these games or this is your first time partying, Mario Party Superstars is a fun way to celebrate the series

» Replay Value

Moderate

Parties are great places to expand your horizons, meet new people, and make fun memories, but the best celebrations are often the ones spent reminiscing with old friends. Mario Party Superstars capitalizes on that notion, forgoing new content to deliver a greatest-hits compilation of boards and minigames from previous titles. The result is a celebration of the franchise that anyone can enjoy regardless of their experience level.

Mario Party Superstars is structured like nearly every other game in the series: Players take turns rolling dice to progress across dynamic gameboards with the ultimate goal of gaining the most stars. At the end of each turn, you take part in a four-player minigame to earn extra coins. The broad appeal of Mario Party remains intact thanks to simple concepts and controls across the entire package. While I enjoyed 2018's Super Mario Party, I'm glad Mario Party Superstars allows for Pro Controller support and doesn't require the use of the cramped single Joy-Con.

Superstars is a tribute to the series' past, which is reflected in its minigames and gameboards. Additionally, you can adjust the rules on how many turns the game lasts and even select which pool of minigames you want to encounter during your session. I'm glad Superstars gives me the option to turn off the pesky end-of-game bonus stars or choose to only play games based on skill. You also have preset options. For example, you can opt to play only games that appear on Nintendo 64 or GameCube or pick

minigames that are easy to enjoy for players of all ages.

As you play through the primary board game mode, you can choose between five of the most iconic stages from the Nintendo 64 titles, all with modern graphics and music. Revisiting Peach's Birthday Cake from the first title is awesome, and I love Woody Woods from Mario Party 3. However, I was disappointed by the low number of boards. These levels are iconic, but I would have loved to see more than five, especially considering they're all remakes of pre-existing stages.

The meat of Mario Party remains its minigames, and thankfully, Superstars makes up for its lack of boards with 100 of the most beloved bite-sized competitions from previous titles. Through the eclectic collection, players compete in a solid mix of skill-based matches and chance-driven minigames. I still adore personal favorites like Face-Lift, Paint Misbehavin', and Motor Rooter. The inclusion of games from nearly every era of Mario Party, many of which are among the best from their respective game, gives Mario Party Superstars an unrivaled minigame pool.

I was excited to see many of my all-time favorite games return in Superstars. However, I'm perplexed by the revival of the infamous Tug o' War game, which resulted in broken controllers and blistered hands on N64 thanks to its stick-rotation controls. This version has a warning to avoid injury by not using your palm, but even so, bringing this minigame back seems like a dangerous choice

given that the Switch's analog sticks are notorious for drifting after even regular use. Thankfully, only a couple of minigames, in the catalog of 100, rely on quick stick rotations.

While most people associate Mario Party with the board game mode, you can experience the minigames on their own through the surprisingly robust Mt. Minigames. Here, you can participate in free play where you choose from any game in the collection, or run the gauntlet as established teams in 2v2 and 3v1 modes. I love having a dedicated space for the excellent sports and puzzle minigames, with options that let you extend the length of activities like volleyball, hockey, and the color-match puzzle titles.

In addition, you can take the competition online and play against people across the globe. You can also connect to online-specific modes to see who can string together the most wins in Survival or take part in themed Daily Challenges that give you three minigames in which to compete. Daily Challenges are fun ways to enjoy a three-pack of activities with similar mechanics – I loved playing the Shoot 'em Up challenge, which let me compete in three aim-based contests.

Mt. Minigames' quick-hit nature might make it the best fit for online play, but you can also experience the board game mode online. Random matchmaking is available, but playing with friends is more fun. On top of being a great game for close acquaintances, you can save your progress in friend matches, letting you pick up where you left off later. In my experience playing on pre-release servers, latency was minimal, though it was more noticeable on timing-based minigames like Hot Rope Jump. Unfortunately, native voice chat remains absent, but you can choose reaction stickers to communicate with other players.

The Mario Party franchise, with its interchangeable boards and minigames, is tailor-made for the compilation format. Mario Party Superstars aptly executes the notion of bringing together the best of the franchise while adding improved online features, plus options to let you play the way you want. Despite its lacking selection of game boards, Mario Party Superstars is a blast regardless of how many parties you've attended in the past. » **Brian Shea**



Sable

Captivating gameplay behind a beautiful mask

8.75

Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Leave your clan and childhood behind to explore the wide world on your hoverbike and discover who you want to be

» Graphics

Every landmark, settlement, and vista bursts off the screen thanks to bright, bold, and consistently captivating visuals

» Sound

Japanese Breakfast lends Sable a contemplative and exciting tone while the sounds of the desert and hum of the speeder immerse you in the world

» Playability

Climbing, gliding, and riding all feel smooth, though the low-fi running animations may look odd to some

» Entertainment

Self-guided exploration is bolstered by quests that give you an excuse to jump on a hoverbike, climb mountains, and float through unexplained ruins in a dazzling ecosystem

» Replay Value

Moderately High

In a typical open-world game, the environment is littered with content, populated with interesting side-quests, and full of breathtaking sights, but an overarching singular objective remains. Whatever the quest, exploring the world and helping locals often requires that you step away from your primary purpose. Sable is refreshing in that regard. This expedition allowed me to lose myself in the small details, talk with diverse characters, enjoy the experience, and admire the sights.

My trek into the desert is a rite of passage called the Gliding, during which I must leave my clan to roam the world gathering masks. I can return to my home when I feel like I have traveled enough and pick a mask to represent my adult identity. Though they lack voices, Sable's characters have no absence of personality. As the motherly Jadi urges me to take time appreciating the trip, her concern makes leaving the clan bittersweet.

When I leave, my first foray into the larger world is extraordinarily compelling. An immense, trackless landscape opens before me as a celebratory Japanese Breakfast song rings out. The moment skillfully replicates the thrill and trepidation Sable feels thanks to her newfound independence. Fortunately, the clever level design keeps players from wandering aimlessly by putting important locations in hard-to-miss spots, and soon I'm ready to hunt down masks.

To collect most masks, you bring three badges to a mysterious mask-crafting entity. The missions that reward these tokens are usually short, and in some cases, simple fetch quests. On the hunt for Hercules Beetle Mask badges, for example, one assignment leads me to scare the literal crap out of bugs – apparently, it makes excellent fertilizer. In a slightly loftier Guard's Mask quest, I received a badge for climbing the evocatively named Bridge of the Betrayed, meeting a character examining their own identity. While neither mission is mechanically complex, I appreciate the narrative variety and how the quests inspire me to travel to the ends of the map. For someone like me, who excitedly pursues side content in most games, Sable's exploration-focused, combat-less gameplay is fantastic.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that my travels took me through an abso-



lutely stunning environment. The art is almost simple, but its vibrancy is astounding. Some may be thrown off by the main character's sprinting, which intentionally runs at 12fps while the rest of the world targets 60fps. However, I appreciated this contrast because it accentuates the animation, like a painting that emphasizes its brush strokes. There is so much life in Sable's visuals. The sand glows under the sunrise, and the stars shine when all the desert's colors fade into the night. The landscape is rife with structures to climb, and these tempting locations often hide valuables, whether a unique article of clothing, a useful stamina-boosting collectible, or an unexpected character interaction. My curiosity was constantly rewarded.

Sable's exploration remains engrossing thanks to its smooth, stamina-dependent climbing, which let me navigate simple, environmental puzzles – like connecting a power supply to open doors in a long-abandoned spacecraft. The gliding stone artifact encases Sable in a protective bubble that allows her to float slowly towards the ground – shielding her from fall damage. This mechanic dared me to scale great heights. Whether summiting an obstacle or gliding in the breeze, the act of exploration was entertaining.

My favorite mode of transportation is unquestionably the hoverbike. While zipping across the game's

parched expanse on the customizable, futuristic vehicle, I could almost feel the wind in my hair. Many settlements have vendors that sell unique parts, which I could mix and match to make the bike my own. The scene where I worked with my clan's machinist to assemble my speeder did an excellent job of revealing how the culture respects technology to an almost spiritual level while not overwhelming me with exposition. This introduction built a bond between my bike and me, which helped me forgive the repeated times the speeder failed to come at my call because the AI couldn't navigate various barriers. Most of the time, I remedied this problem by fast-traveling to an already discovered, nearby location, which would teleport both me and my machine to the same place. It's a bit inconvenient but never took more than a few seconds away from the action.

Sable ends in the same way it starts, at home with family. The narrative payoff is not actually about your final choice, and that may rub more goal-oriented players the wrong way. However, I found the conclusion a fitting end to a side quest-focused exploration game. For those who love to explore, I can't recommend Sable enough. Every element – beautiful graphics, compelling traversal, and player-driven plot – works together to ensure I simply lost myself in the world. » **Jill Grodt**

Alan Wake Remastered

Still one of the best stories in gaming

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Epic Games **Developer** Remedy Entertainment **Release** October 5 **Rating** T

8

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

We need more games like Alan Wake – a horror experience that scares you, but not in the ways we often see. It has many of the genre’s trappings like carefully placed jump scares, ax-wielding murders lurking in the shadows, and unsightly supernatural threats, but the true terror comes from words written on pieces of paper and thoughts expressed by protagonist Alan Wake.

Alan is a writer lost in his stories, and it’s up to the player to figure out what’s real and what’s a fabrication. Many of the words you read foreshadow terrible fates or show how Alan is spiraling into an abyss. The strong narrative pulse makes this 11-year old game feel somewhat timeless, even with gameplay showing some rust.

Alan’s story boils with intensity from the moment you meet him, trapped in a strange nightmare that leads him to a lighthouse. The story draws heavy inspiration from the many works of Stephen King and David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks* and is open to interpretation. My understanding of what happens is likely radically different from yours – making it a hell of a game to discuss.

To get over his writer’s block, Alan travels with his wife Alice to the small Washington port of Bright Falls, where he attempts to find his writing pulse again. However, not all is as it seems. The city is obsessed with Alan. Stans of him holding his latest book are scattered about in the oddest of places. That feeling of not being able to trust your eyes, or even Alan’s actions, hold the narrative in a tense and highly entertaining

state for most of the journey. An early sequence where Alan dives into a lake is an excellent example of the narrative’s dramatic shifts: The second his hands hit the water, he awakens in his car, blood dripping from his forehead. What happened here? Which moment is a dream? Thoughts like these flare up through most of this dark tale.

Alan Wake looked great when it was released in 2010, and it still looks good today, but the remaster efforts aren’t enough to fully hide the game’s Xbox 360 roots. The world and character models are subtly touched up to deliver smaller details and a little more realism. The crisp 4K resolution makes the dimly lit woods more terrifying but shines a spotlight on some of the aged qualities, like facial animations that don’t always line up with a character’s emotion or Alan’s movements, which are a little too mechanical and exaggerated. The game looks antiquated, but not in a bad way. It has an eerie (yet believable) quality that matches the game’s creepy atmosphere.

Even with Alan being a little squirrely and a horrible jumper, he’s still fun to control. Using a flashlight’s beam to remove the darkness from an enraged being is surprisingly intense, given how quickly the battery dies. I enjoyed the challenge that comes from keeping the beam on the target long enough to stun them and make them vulnerable to bullets. A nicely designed evasive maneuver adds some strategy to the mix and allows Alan to separate himself from packs of enemies or more formidable chainsaw-wielding foes.

Some frustration comes from the lack of visibility during conflicts. I wasn’t aware of a second or third enemy in some conflicts until they took a swipe at me. Thankfully, Alan has plenty of health to regain command of the situation. And he isn’t combating only humans or even living things. Barrels and angry, possessed farm equipment try to crush him. They add variety to the gameplay but are unintentionally comical in design. Beware the tractor!

After the credits roll on this excellent story, give yourself a few days before jumping into the DLC. Dream up theories about Alan’s fate, discuss them with friends, and then see where developer Remedy takes the tale in *The Signal*, a short, new DLC chapter that turns the narrative on its head again. You can then jump right into *The Writer*, the final act for this first game that provides closure for some story threads.

Remedy also provides a great reason to play the game again through two dev-team commentary tracks. You can turn these commentaries on at any time, and they provide fun insight into the design decisions and the making of Alan Wake. One of the tracks is brand new and features reflective thoughts from the game’s writer and director, Sam Lake.

Remedy’s latest game, *Control*, sets up a hell of a scenario for an Alan Wake sequel. It would be a shame if we didn’t get it, especially after reliving this classic game. It holds up well and shows us just how strong Remedy is as a storyteller.

» **Andrew Reiner**

» Concept

A horror mystery that’s lost little of its narrative bite. The gameplay shows its age, but the story keeps the game exciting

» Graphics

The environments, character models, and textures are slightly enhanced. The lighting and atmospherics dazzle (especially in 4K). Exaggerated character animations and awkward facial expressions remind you it’s an older game

» Sound

Alan’s narration is exceptional, and Barry is as charming as ever. Director Sam Lake’s bonus commentary track speaks to Alan Wake’s place in history and some of the thinking that went into *Control*

» Playability

Pointing a light at enemies is surprisingly fun and holds up well today, even if there are some frustrating encounters

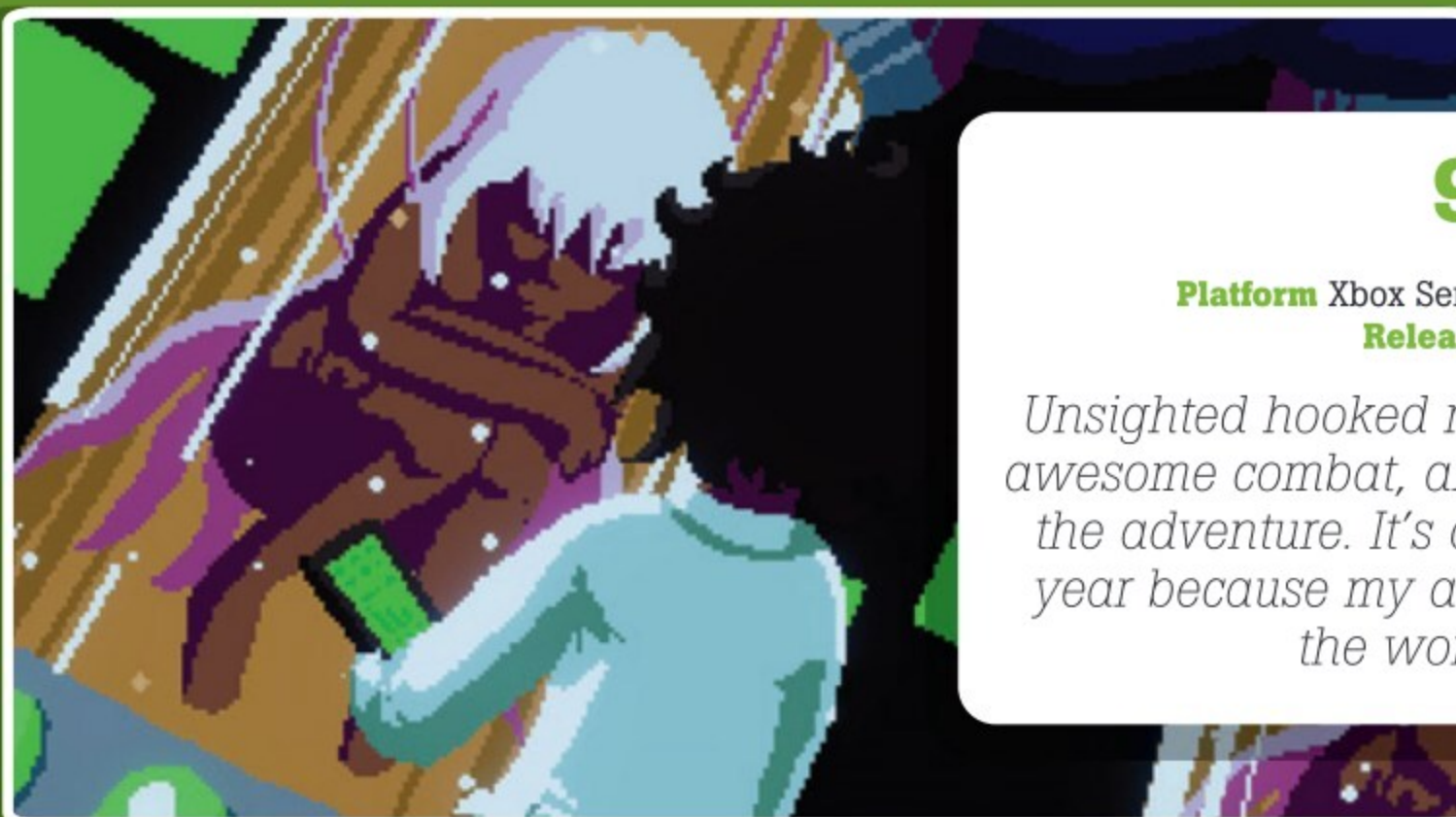
» Entertainment

This is a great game to discuss with friends – a book club experience for gamers. Well worth revisiting over a decade later to see how your theories hold up

» Replay Value

Moderate





9 Unsighted

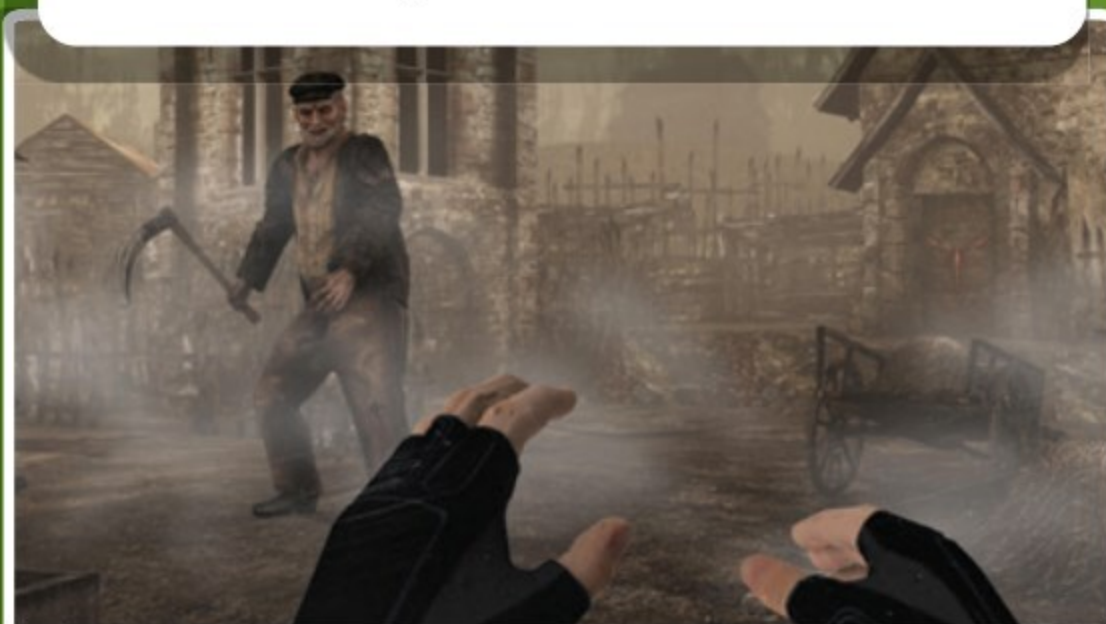
Platform Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release September 30 **Rating** T

Unsighted hooked me thanks to its fascinating world, awesome combat, and a doomsday clock that enriches the adventure. It's one of my favorite surprises of the year because my actions made a genuine impact on the world. — Marcus Stewart

8.75 Resident Evil 4 VR

Platform Quest **Release** October 21 **Rating** M

If you're a fan of RE4, have access to an Oculus Quest 2, and don't mind the morally and ethically questionable need to have a Facebook account to play an Oculus game, I can't recommend RE4VR enough. — Blake Hester



8.25 Age Of Empires IV

Platform PC **Release** October 28 **Rating** T

While Age of Empires IV lacks any ambition to even gently jostle the standards set by Age of Empires II decades earlier, it's a good way to play a classic-feeling RTS today with some slick polish and panache. — Daniel Tack

7 Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release October 5 **Rating** E10+

While I think it has a lot of heart and is a good fighting game at its core, All-Star Brawl is missing the magic and wonder that Smash Bros. embodies and lacks meaningful casual appeal. — John Carson

7.5 The Dark Pictures Anthology: House Of Ashes

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release October 21 **Rating** M

While the third entry in The Dark Pictures Anthology's series boasts a cool antagonist and enjoyable moments, its scares and overall adventure lack the punch to make it a terrifying standout. — Marcus Stewart

7.25 NHL 22

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One **Release** October 15
Rating E10+

Playing NHL 22 is like watching a predictable team. On the one hand, there's comfort in knowing what to expect. On the other, it's not fun seeing the same plays over and over again. — Kimberley Wallace



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Know Your Halo

Halo is celebrating its 20th anniversary, and the franchise has produced lots of lore to uncover. Take this quiz, and find out if you're a real prophet of truth, or nothing more than an ignorant grunt. *by Matt Miller*

- Master Chief was part of the Spartan-II program, which produced the most powerful super-soldiers humanity has ever seen. Who was not one of his Spartan-II colleagues?**
 - Kelly
 - Linda
 - Jameson
 - Fred
- Which Halo ring was destroyed at the end of Halo: Combat Evolved?**
 - Installation 00
 - Installation 03
 - Installation 04
 - Installation 07
- While he is often referred to simply as the Arbiter, that role was only given to the famed Sangheili warrior as a mark of shame. What is his given name?**
 - Thel 'Vadam
 - Jul 'Mdama
 - San'Shyuum
 - Avu Med 'Telcam
- We miss Sergeant Johnson. He was great. Who shot him, ultimately leading to his death?**
 - The Gravemind
 - Tartarus
 - The High Prophet of Regret
 - 343 Guilty Spark
- Did you know the Didact was married? It's true! Who was once his spouse?**
 - The Master Builder
 - The Librarian
 - Fortencho, Lord of Admirals
 - Cortana
- One of these is not like the others.**
 - Scorpion
 - Mongoose
 - Mantis
 - Wraith
- Dr. Catherine Halsey is a real mystery. Which of these is a true statement about her?**
 - She died after the fall of Reach
 - She was the architect of the Spartan-III program
 - She is the mother of Miranda Keyes
 - She defected to join the Banished
- Cortana has actually appeared in a number of colors, but which hue have we never seen her adopt?**
 - Yellow
 - Blue
 - Green
 - Purple
- Which of these artificial intelligences joined Cortana's Created faction?**
 - Sloan
 - Roland
 - The Weapon
 - Mendicant Bias
- The Flood are pretty gross, right?**
 - Yes, definitely
 - I mean, everybody's gotta eat.
 - No, they're kind of cute in the right light.
 - I'm part of the Flood, and I'm offended by the question. 💎

SCORING:

0-1

You should really make a covenant with yourself to try harder.

2-3

Not exactly a flood of correct answers, is it?

4-5

You should be banished for this kind of performance.

6-7

Wow! ONI steps from greatness.

8-9

Almost a Locke for the top spot.

10

You're a real master, chief!

ANSWER KEY: 1. C, 2. C, 3. A, 4. D, 5. B, 6. D, 7. C, 8. A, 9. A, 10. A

A black t-shirt is laid flat against a background with a repeating pattern of small, light-colored crosses. The t-shirt features a large, stylized, white, hand-drawn style logo that reads "Game Informer". Below this logo, in a smaller, similar font, are the words "MPLS & MINN".

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